

## Science News

### Experiences Make People Happier Than Material Goods, Says University Of Colorado Prof

ScienceDaily (Dec. 28, 2004) — When it comes to spending money in the pursuit of happiness, the "good life" may be better lived by doing things rather than by having things, according to a University of Colorado at Boulder researcher.

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In a society that thrives on the pursuit of happiness, a question that often comes to mind, especially around the holiday shopping season, is what really makes us happy.

"We found that people receive more enduring pleasure and satisfaction from investing in life experiences than material possessions," said CU-Boulder assistant professor of psychology Leaf Van Boven.

Through a series of surveys and experiments spanning several years, Van Boven found that people from various walks of life were made happier by investing their

discretionary income in life experiences than in material goods.

In a national survey of more than 12,000 Americans conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of Northwestern Mutual Financial Network, respondents were asked to think of an experiential and a material purchase they had made with the "aim of increasing your happiness." Van Boven found that when asked which made them happier, most respondents chose their experiential investment over their material possession.

In a follow-up laboratory experiment involving undergraduate students, Van Boven found that the students experienced more positive feelings after thinking about an experiential purchase than after pondering a material purchase.

He suggested three possible reasons that "experiential" purchases -- those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience -- make people happier than material purchases.

According to Van Boven, experiences bring more joy than material goods because they are more open to positive reinterpretations, are a more meaningful part of one's identity and contribute more to successful social relationships.

A paper on the research by Van Boven appears in the December 2003 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Professor Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University also participated in the research.

Experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation, because they tend to be associated more with deeper personal meanings, whereas possessions are always "out there" and separate from who we are, according to Van Boven.

"For example, if you go on a hiking trip, and the weather is terrible, you might not view it as a pleasurable experience in the here and now," he said. "Instead, you may view it as a challenge, and over time remember the positive aspects of the experience more than the negative aspects. With material things you can't do this, because they are what they are."

Van Boven said another factor is that experiences are a more

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meaningful part of one's identity.

"Our culture highly values accomplishing goals and challenging oneself. We strongly value accomplishments," Van Boven said. "Also, experiences tend to be associated more with deeper personal meanings than possessions."

Finally, Van Boven suggests that experiences are more pleasurable to talk about and they more effectively foster successful social relationships, which are closely associated with happiness, he said.

"Experiences foster relationships because you tend to do things with other people, so there is a great social aspect to it," Van Boven said.

"Furthermore, we often share stories about experiences because they're more fun to talk about than material possessions. They are simply more entertaining."

Adapted from materials provided by [University Of Colorado At Boulder](#).

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