

Study shows experiences are better than possessions

31 March 2010, By George Lowery

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new Cornell study finds that lust for material things fade but our unique experiences remain with us for a long time.

The [satisfaction](#) we get from buying vacations, bikes for exercise and other experiences starts high and keeps growing. The initial high we feel from acquiring a flashy car or megascreen TV, on the other hand, trails off rather quickly, reports a new Cornell study.

Why are experiences more satisfying? For one thing, it's harder to compare them to others' experiences; they belong to us alone.

"Your experiences are inherently less comparative, they're less subject to and less undermined by invidious social comparisons," said professor of psychology Thomas Gilovich, who published the study with Travis J. Carter, Ph.D. '10, in a recent issue of [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

People are less satisfied with material purchases because they are more likely to second-guess what they could have had (such as a new model or a better price), the researchers found. Consumers spend more time thinking about material purchases they didn't choose than they spend when they buy an experience.

"There's a lot of work in the area of well-being and [happiness](#) showing that we adapt to most things," Gilovich said. "Therefore, things like a new material purchase make us happy initially, but very quickly we adapt to it, and it doesn't bring us all that much joy. You could argue that adaptation is sort of an enemy of happiness. Other kinds of expenditures, such as experiential purchases, don't seem as subject to adaptation."

Gilovich conducted studies about five years ago that people get more enduring happiness from their experiences than their possessions. The new

research looks at why that is.

"Imagine you buy a flat panel TV. You come to my house, and I have a bigger, clearer picture than yours. You're bummed out," Gilovich said. "But suppose you go on a vacation to the Caribbean. You find out I've done the same, and mine sounds better than yours. It might bother you a little bit, but not nearly to the same degree because you have your memories; it's your idiosyncratic connection to the Caribbean that makes it your vacation. That makes it less comparable to mine, hence your enjoyment isn't undermined as much."

In one study, a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar were both on a table. The volunteers were told they could have the chips, while the researchers implied that others got the chocolate. Another group of participants received a small physical gift that was next to a better gift that was intended for someone else. The participants reported they felt less satisfied in the latter case.

"Visible comparison undermined the enjoyment of the material goods, but it didn't undermine the enjoyment of the experiential good [potato chips]," Gilovich explained. "If you consume an experience in the presence of something better, it doesn't as consistently or powerfully undermine the experience."

What does it all mean? "Our results suggest that if people get more enduring happiness from their experiences than their possessions, at a policy level, we might want to make available the resources that enable people to have experiences. You can't go hiking if there are no trails. And if those are the kinds of things that give people more enduring enjoyment, we need to make sure we're creating the kinds of communities that have parks, trails and so on that promote [experiences](#) that produce real enjoyment."

Provided by Cornell University

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