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## WHAT MAKES FOR A MERRY CHRISTMAS?

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**ABSTRACT.** Despite the importance of Christmas within many cultures, research has not examined the types of experiences and activities that are associated with holiday well-being. Thus, we asked 117 individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 80, to answer questions about their satisfaction, stress, and emotional state during the Christmas season, as well as questions about their experiences, use of money, and consumption behaviors. More happiness was reported when family and religious experiences were especially salient, and lower well-being occurred when spending money and receiving gifts predominated. Engaging in environmentally conscious consumption practices also predicted a happier holiday, as did being older and male. In sum, the materialistic aspects of modern Christmas celebrations may undermine well-being, while family and spiritual activities may help people to feel more satisfied.

**KEY WORDS:** Happiness, consumption, Christmas festal days

“I get up early and with cash and credit cards in hand go about the difficult and dirty task of spreading Christmas cheer.”

Anonymous participant, Hirschman and LaBarbera (1989), p. 140

The Christmas holiday has evolved from an event banned in some American colonies to one that dominates the month of December. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2000, 96% of Americans celebrate the holiday (Gallup Organization, 2000). Indeed, few other holidays change the face of a nation and the behavior of its citizens as does Christmas. Offices close down, people travel back home, billions of dollars are spent on gifts, endless strings of lights are hung in homes and city squares, and church pews fill.

Many themes intermingle during the holiday (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989). Originally it began as a celebration of the birth of the religious figure Jesus Christ, who preached a doctrine of love and anti-materialism. Christmas also involves renewing ties with extended family and engaging in traditions such as feasting, caroling, and decorating an evergreen. Increasingly, however, the materialistic elements of the Christmas holiday have become predominant, with the primary figure of reverence being Santa Claus, a “secular version of Christ” whose “realm is that of material abundance” (Belk, 1993, p. 83). Indeed,



the Christmas season is a key element of the US economy, with an estimated 1/6 of all retail sales occurring due to Christmas (Carrier, 1993). Americans report spending about \$800 on Christmas gifts, and many consumers are still in debt 6 months later as a result of this spending (Center for a New American Dream, n.d.).

Despite the prominent and recurring place that Christmas holds in many people's lives, there is surprisingly little empirical research about the season. Consumer research has provided interesting analyses of its myths, movies, and media messages (Belk, 1989; 1993), sociology has examined gift-giving rituals (Caplow, 1982; 1984), and anthropology has investigated meanings of the holiday in various cultures (Miller, 1993). Within the field of psychology, what literature exists on Christmas mostly concerns whether psychiatric admissions (Velamoor et al., 1999) and suicide rates (Jessen and Jensen, 1999) increase during the season. Surprisingly, we were unable to find any quantitative empirical studies that have endeavored to understand the experiences and qualities which are associated with happiness during Christmas.

### **The Current Study**

We therefore set out to examine what makes for a merry Christmas by examining how different types of experiences and activities predict people's satisfaction, stress, and emotional state during Christmas. Is happiness during the holiday primarily a function of the religious and family experiences that are historically central to the celebration? Or are materialistic means the true path to Christmas joy, as implied by the inundation of advertisements and the reign of Santa Claus?

Our primary interest in this study concerned the types of experiences that individuals have during the holiday, and how these relate to their well-being. Past literature (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989) and pilot interviews suggested that seven main types of activities (and hence experiences) occur during the holidays: (1) Spending time with family; (2) Participating in religious activities; (3) Maintaining traditions (e.g., decorating a Christmas tree); (4) Spending money on others via the purchase of gifts; (5) Receiving gifts from others; (6) Helping others (e.g., Salvation Army bell-ringers); and (7) Enjoying the sensual aspects of the holiday (e.g., good food).

Our theoretical perspective suggests that the relative frequency of these experiences will bear differential relations to well-being. Past research shows that people whose lives are focused on goals such as

intimacy and community feeling generally report greater well-being, whereas those who are more concerned with money, possessions, and image are less happy (Kasser, 2000; Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Similarly, satisfying experiences are largely a function of feeling close to others, while a strong focus on money and status can undermine feelings of satisfaction (Sheldon et al., 2001). We thus predicted that people would report more well-being at Christmas time when experiences of family closeness and helping others were particularly salient. We also expected that diminished well-being would be reported to the extent that people's experiences of the holiday were especially focused on the materialistic aspects of the season (i.e., spending and receiving). Some recent work suggests that religious experiences are powerful predictors of happiness (Emmons et al., 1998; Myers, 2000), and so we also examined this type of experience. Finally, in the spirit of comprehensiveness, we explored tradition and sensual enjoyment, but made no predictions concerning how they would relate to well-being.

The materialistic aspects of the season were also examined in this study by obtaining estimates of how much subjects spent on others, went into debt, and gave to church and charity, as well as the monetary value of the gifts they received from others. Although many messages in consumer society suggest that spending and receiving might bring happiness during the holiday, we expected that such financial issues would generally contribute little to nothing in terms of happiness during the holiday. We were curious, however, whether donating money to others might provide some boosts to well-being.

Holiday consumption practices were the third set of potential predictors of holiday well-being that we explored. People often become even larger consumers of natural resources during the holiday, using more energy for light displays and more gasoline for trips out of town. In their pursuit of Christmas joy, people also create massive amounts of trash (one estimate is 5 million extra tons between Thanksgiving and New year's day in the US (Lilienfield, 2002)). Is the environmental degradation resulting from the materialistic aspect of the holiday a necessary component of a merry Christmas? On the one hand, many calls for healthier environmental behaviors suggest that they involve sacrifice, and thus a decrement in well-being. On the other hand, the goals of protecting the environment can bring about well-being (Eigner, 2001; Sohr, 2001), and the same values that are associated with greater well-being (i.e., personal growth, affiliation, and community feeling) also predict

better environmental stewardship (Sheldon and McGregor, 2000), suggesting that positive consumption practices at Christmas might promote happiness. To explore this issue, we examined how well-being relates to practices that decrease the ecological impact of one's holiday celebrations.

Lastly, we explored whether the demographic factors of age, gender, and income might relate to people's happiness at Christmas. Recent work shows that older individuals typically report somewhat higher general well-being (Argyle, 1999; Sheldon and Kasser, 2001); we wondered whether this would generalize to their experience of Christmas. Women report more negative affect (NA) than do men (Costa et al., 2001) and seem to take on more of the responsibilities for shopping (Fischer and Arnold, 1990), as well as for wrapping, cooking, and cleaning during the holiday (Caplow, 1982); females may therefore report lower well-being at Christmas. Income, in contrast, is generally not a very good predictor of well-being in developed nations such as the United States (Myers, 2000) and so we expected to find that it was not associated with people's happiness at Christmas.

## METHODS

### Subjects

Subjects were recruited through two different means. On December 26, 2001, packets including a cover letter and a survey were mailed to 400 randomly selected individuals living in Knox County, IL. By January 5, 2002, 73 usable surveys had been returned, yielding an 18% response rate. On January 7, 2002, 70 surveys were administered to undergraduates at Knox College who were taking lower-level psychology courses. Of these, 48 were returned by January 9, yielding a 69% response rate. All respondents received a \$5 honorarium.

Four subjects who reported that they did not celebrate Christmas were removed from the sample, leaving a final sample size of 117. Of those responding to demographic questions, 47 were male and 69 were female; 102 were Caucasian, 3 were Asian, 3 were African-American, and 1 was Hispanic. Age ranged between 18 and 80 (Mean = 38), and yearly family income ranged between \$4800 and \$800,000 (Median = \$54,000).

### Measures and Procedures

All subjects received a cover letter explaining the study as well as a series of questionnaires (some of which were not relevant to the present study) concerning their experience of the Christmas season. Subjects were asked to think of the Christmas season as the period between about December 12 and December 27. Measures were administered in the following order.

#### *Well-being*

We adapted the five item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot and Diener, 1993), and asked subjects to report on a 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) scale their agreement with items such as "I am satisfied with this Christmas season." A summary Christmas satisfaction variable was computed by averaging these items. Next, subjects rated on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) scale the extent to which they felt each of 21 moods (based on the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988)) on average during Christmas. Ten of the moods (e.g., interested, enthusiastic) were averaged to form a Positive Affect (PA) measure, and eleven (e.g., upset, sad) were averaged to form a Negative Affect (NA) measure.<sup>1</sup> Finally, four items were written for this study to assess stress levels at Christmas ("I felt stressed/relaxed/overwhelmed/rushed this Christmas season"). These were administered on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) scale. A Christmas Stress variable was computed by averaging the four items ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

To obtain an aggregate measure of well-being, the four well-being variables were each standardized and a Christmas Well-being (CWB) variable was computed by adding subjects' scores on Satisfaction and PA and subtracting their NA and Stress scores. As we have found in other studies (e.g., Sheldon and Elliott, 1999; Sheldon and Kasser, 2001) a higher order factor analysis of the well-being variables supported the computation of this aggregate; in this case, a one-factor solution was discovered that accounted for 58.28% of the variance.

#### *Occurrences*

Subjects were next presented with 25 "experiences and activities" and asked to rate "how much each experience actually occurred during this Christmas season" on a 1 (completely absent) to 5 (occurred a great deal) scale. These items tapped the seven *a priori* domains mentioned in the introduction and reported in Table I, with either three or

TABLE I

Christmas occurrence domains, sample items, Cronbach's Alpha, and mean and standard deviation in this sample

Domain	Sample item	Alpha	Mean	SD
Family	Being close to my family and friends	0.83	4.05	0.90
Religion	Practicing my religion	0.85	2.88	1.26
Tradition	Carrying on holiday traditions	0.64	2.87	0.89
Spending	Spending a lot of money on others	0.66	2.84	0.77
Receiving	Receiving really nice gifts	0.48	2.40	0.74
Helping	Helping others in need	0.78	2.44	0.86
Enjoying	Eating and/or drinking well	0.50	3.22	0.75

four items each; the table reports sample items, Cronbach's alphas, and means and standard deviations for each domain. Alphas were generally acceptable, but were rather low for receiving and sensual enjoyment. In order to assess the salience of each type of occurrence for subjects during the Christmas season, a relative occurrence score was computed for each domain by subtracting the total occurrence of all events, regardless of domain, from occurrence scores for each of the seven domains. For example, to understand the relative salience of religion in a person's Christmas, we averaged the subject's occurrence ratings for the religion items, and then subtracted the subject's average occurrence ratings for all items from his/her religion score. This procedure corrects for subjects' general tendency to endorse items as having had occurred, regardless of their content, and thereby provides a measure of the relative salience of different types of events that is uncontaminated by this response tendency.

#### *Use of Money*

Subjects next reported their best estimates in dollars of how much they spent on gifts for others, gave to church and charity, and went into debt as a result of Christmas expenditures. They also estimated the total worth of all the gifts and cash they personally received during Christmas. Each estimate was divided by the subject's reported family income that year to equalize money usage as a percentage of one's income.

#### *Positive Consumption Practices*

Subjects were provided with a list of 13 "things people sometimes do during the Christmas season" culled from suggestions about how to

change consumption practices during the holiday (Center for a New American Dream, n.d.). Subjects were asked to circle “Yes” if they had done the activity and “No” if they had not. A factor analysis was conducted, yielding a scree plot that suggested the retention of three factors. The first (Eigenvalue = 2.20, % variance = 16.90) was labeled Environmentally Friendly practices, and consisted of five activities, including buying a live tree to replant, using organic or locally grown foods, giving charitable donations as presents, and giving environmentally friendly presents. The second factor (Eigenvalue = 1.58, % variance = 12.13) was labeled Self-creations, and consisted of four items such as giving presents one created, giving presents of one’s time, and using alternatives to wrapping paper. The third factor (Eigenvalue = 1.49, % variance = 11.45) was labeled Limiting spending, and consisted of two items including drawing names for gift giving (rather than giving to everyone) and agreeing with family to set limits on spending.

## RESULTS

### How Happy are People at Christmas?

Table II reports means and standard deviations of the four well-being variables measured in this study, as well as the percentage of subjects scoring within different ranges of the scale. As can be seen, subjects are on the whole reasonably satisfied with their holiday experience, with 74.8% scoring above “neutral” in terms of their satisfaction. Subjects’ stress levels approach the midpoint of the scale, with 57.4% disagreeing that the holiday was stressful and 43.6% agreeing. The holiday experience involved substantially more PA than NA for most individuals, with 75.4% of the sample reporting more PA than “somewhat”, and only 6.2% reporting more than “somewhat” NA. In sum, then,

TABLE II

Means, standard deviations, and percentages of sample scoring 1–2, 2–3, 3–4, and 4–5 on the four well-being variables during the Christmas season

	Mean	SD	% 1–2	% 2–3	% 3–4	% 4–5
Satisfaction	3.49	0.85	2.6	22.6	41.8	33.0
Stress	2.77	1.00	17.4	40.0	27.8	14.8
PA	3.44	0.71	0.9	23.7	50.8	24.6
NA	1.84	0.75	61.9	31.9	4.4	1.8

most people are relatively satisfied with their holiday and experience more PA than NA. However, a substantial number of subjects reported significant stress during the holiday season.

In order to examine whether people were happier during Christmas relative to other times of the year, we compared the means for satisfaction, PA, and NA reported in Table II to data published elsewhere. (The stress scale was developed for this study, so we could not compare it to any norms.) First we compared the Christmas satisfaction scores to those reported by Pavot and Diener (1993), who reported means of 23–25.2 for several samples of English-speaking college students, and means of 23.9–25.1 for several samples of English-speaking adults. To obtain a comparable score for the current sample's report of Christmas satisfaction, we multiplied the mean reported in Table II by five (the number of items), in order to obtain a sum, and multiplied this sum by 7/5, in order to adjust for the fact that we used a five-point scale whereas Pavot and Diener used a seven-point scale. This procedure resulted in a mean Christmas satisfaction of 24.4, which is quite comparable to the scores reported in Pavot and Diener's samples.

Next we compared the affect means from this sample to those reported by Watson et al. (1988) for a group of 586 individuals who completed the PANAS with reference to the "past few weeks," which seemed the most comparable time frame to our study. Subjects in the current study reported significantly more PA (3.44 vs. 3.20,  $t(113) = 3.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than did the normative sample, but did not differ in their experience of NA (1.84 vs. 1.95,  $t(112) = -0.83$ ,  $p = 0.41$ ).

### **Associations of Christmas Well-being with Predictors**

We began by examining the associations between demographic factors and CWB. First, we conducted  $t$ -tests comparing males with females and married with unmarried individuals. No significant differences were detected for marital status, but gender was associated with differences in CWB, as reported in Table III. Females reported significantly more stress, as well as marginally more NA and marginally less overall CWB. The top portion of Table IV reports correlations of the remaining demographic factors and CWB. Subjects' income and education bore no significant relations to well-being at Christmas time; however age was associated with less NA, more PA, and more CWB.

TABLE III  
Means, standard deviations, and *t*-tests comparing gender differences in CWB

	Males		Females		<i>t</i> -test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Satis.	3.62	0.80	3.40	0.88	1.38
Stress	2.42	0.98	3.01	0.95	-3.23**
PA	3.38	0.72	3.47	0.71	-0.66
NA	1.68	0.62	1.96	0.80	-1.98 <sup>+</sup>
CWB	0.64	2.72	-0.49	3.19	1.94 <sup>+</sup>

Note: <sup>+</sup> =  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . Satis. = Satisfaction; PA = Positive affect; NA = Negative affect; CWB = Christmas well-being; degrees of freedom vary between 110 and 112.

TABLE IV  
Pearson correlations of CWB with demographics, relative occurrences, use of money, and positive consumption practices

	Satis.	Stress	PA	NA	CWB
Demographics					
Education	0.15	0.10	0.10	-0.05	0.07
Income	-0.07	-0.12	-0.06	-0.11	0.04
Age	0.15 <sup>+</sup>	-0.06	0.18*	-0.30**	0.23*
Occurrences					
Family	0.13	-0.16 <sup>+</sup>	0.15	-0.16 <sup>+</sup>	0.19*
Helping	-0.12	-0.06	0.02	-0.13	0.02
Religion	0.19*	-0.08	0.14	-0.27**	0.23*
Tradition	0.10	0.12	0.11	0.01	0.03
Spending	-0.14	0.29**	-0.13	0.20*	-0.25**
Receiving	-0.22*	0.12	-0.30**	0.28**	-0.30**
Enjoying	0.05	-0.26**	0.05	0.12	0.08
Money use					
% income spent on gifts	-0.07	0.06	0.07	-0.11	0.02
% income to char. & church	-0.04	0.01	0.18 <sup>+</sup>	-0.04	0.05
% income in debt	-0.03	0.00	-0.00	0.02	-0.01
Positive consumption					
Environment	0.22*	-0.16 <sup>+</sup>	0.16	-0.11	0.21*
Create	0.11	-0.05	0.08	0.08	0.06
Limit spending	-0.14	0.19*	-0.08	0.14	-0.20*

Note: <sup>+</sup> =  $p < 0.10$ ; \* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . Satis. = Satisfaction; PA = Positive affect; NA = Negative affect; CWB = Christmas well-being; Environment = Environmentally friendly practices; Create = Self-creations.

We next examined the relative occurrence of the seven types of experiences at Christmas time. As presented in Table IV, experiences with family were associated with greater overall CWB. Religious activity was also a strong predictor of higher well-being, as it was associated with less NA, more satisfaction, and more CWB. In contrast, the materialistic aspects of Christmas were negatively correlated with well-being, as predicted. People for whom spending was a relatively salient experience reported more stress and NA, and lower CWB. People for whom receiving gifts was a relatively salient experience reported more NA, as well as less satisfaction, less PA, and less CWB. Finally, helping others and engaging in traditions bore no relations to well-being, and sensual enjoyment was associated only with less stress.

Next examined were the money usage factors. As we expected, these were generally unrelated to well-being. Neither spending a relatively large percentage of one's income or going into substantial debt related to having a merrier Christmas. Marginally more PA was reported by those who gave money to church and charity. Finally, those who received gifts whose monetary worth was high, relative to their yearly income, actually reported more NA, conceptually replicating results presented above.

Lastly we examined the relation of positive consumption practices to CWB. People who reported engaging in many environmentally friendly practices reported more satisfaction and overall CWB. Self-creations were unrelated to the five outcomes. Surprisingly, those who limited spending reported more stress and lower CWB.<sup>2</sup>

### **Exploratory Mediational Analyses**

Finally, we attempted to understand the processes through which age was related to CWB by conducting exploratory mediational analyses.<sup>3</sup> Sheldon and Kasser (2001) found that older people reported greater overall well-being, but that this correlation was accounted for by the content of subjects' strivings. Specifically, older individuals were more likely to have strivings focused on generativity and spirituality, and less likely to have strivings focused on money and popularity, which partially accounted for why they reported greater overall happiness. We tested whether a similar mediational pattern might emerge in the current sample by examining whether older people reported having more of the experiences associated with CWB, and whether these associations accounted for older persons' enhanced CWB. As shown earlier

in Table IV, age was related to CWB, as were four of the variables representing the relative occurrence of different types of experiences. Two of these experiences were correlated with age, namely, the relative occurrences of religion ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and of receiving gifts ( $r = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). To test the final link of the mediational chain (Baron and Kenny, 1986), we conducted a partial correlation between age and CWB, controlling for the relative occurrences of religion and receiving. Consistent with our mediational hypothesis, age no longer bore a significant association to CWB ( $pr = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.37$ ) after controlling for these two types of experiences.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we set out to understand the experience of well-being at Christmas. First, we explored people's reports of their holiday satisfaction, stress, and PA and NA. Most individuals did indeed report a relatively merry Christmas: Around 75% of the sample said that they were satisfied with their Christmas and that they had experienced substantial PA, while under 10% reported much NA. This sample did report significant amounts of stress, however, with just under half saying that they agreed their holiday had been stressful. Comparing our results to other published norms suggested that this sample experienced somewhat more PA, but did not differ in satisfaction or NA, from how people report feeling during other times of the year. Although these comparisons should be treated with great caution, as the samples and scales were not entirely comparable across studies, it does appear that people were somewhat "merrier" during Christmas than usual, but no more satisfied and no less upset. It would be very interesting to know how stress levels during the holiday compare to other times of year.

Next, we examined several predictors of holiday well-being. Individuals who reported a high relative occurrence of being with their families and of engaging in religious activities reported greater overall well-being. This is consistent with past research demonstrating that relationships and spiritual experiences enhance personal well-being (Emmons et al., 1988; Kasser and Ryan, 1993; Myers, 2000). Why might these types of experiences lead to better well-being during the holiday? We suggest that both family and religion can provide satisfaction of needs for relatedness to others, which is a well-known

determinant of positive functioning (Baumeister and Leary, 1995); additionally, religious experience might provide a sense of greater meaning, another important determinant of happiness. A different interpretation is that because family and spirituality are core aspects of the Christmas season, people with these types of experiences meet the dominant social expectations of the season, and thus may be happy because they know that they are being consistent with such expectations.

If, however, following the dictates of society is the primary way by which people obtain happiness at Christmas, the season's materialistic aspects should also be positively associated with well-being, given the number of cultural messages trumpeting the path of spending and receiving. Such a prediction was clearly not supported in the current study. Instead, individuals reported significantly lower well-being when spending and receiving were especially salient experiences. Despite the fact that people spend relatively large portions of their income on gifts, as well as time shopping for and wrapping them, such behavior apparently contributes little to holiday joy. Further, the amount individuals spent and went into debt was unrelated to their CWB, suggesting that excessive economic activity does little to enhance satisfaction. Additionally, when people received gifts that totaled a substantial percentage of their income, they reported more NA, adding more evidence that the materialistic aspects of the season may undermine happiness.

While apparently at odds with the bulk of messages in America's consumeristic, capitalistic society, these results fit quite well with research showing that well-being is low when materialistic values and experiences are relatively central to people's lives. Kasser (2002) reviewed evidence that a focus on money, possessions, image, and status distracts people from experiences which could enhance their well-being. It seems likely that similar processes may occur during Christmas, such that people who focus on the materialistic aspects of the season are probably less involved with the family and religious experiences that could bring them greater joy. Indeed, the relative occurrence of spending was associated with less family ( $r = -0.14$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ) and religious ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) occurrences, and the relative occurrence of receiving was associated with less family ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and religious ( $r = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) occurrences. Materialistic strivings also involve more stressful experiences (going to the mall is generally

more stressful than going to church) and provide fewer chances for intrinsic motivation and flow (wrapping presents generally yields fewer inherent rewards than spending time playing games or conversing with family). Simply said, a focus on materialism, while perhaps beneficial for the economy, distracts people from the “true meaning” of the season.

Another way in which we investigated the materialistic aspects of the season was by assessing individuals’ consumption behavior. Consistent with our assumption that the same types of behaviors that benefit the environment are also good for people’s well-being, we found that individuals who engaged in more environmentally friendly consumption behaviors were more satisfied during the holiday. Thus, by diminishing the negative environmental impacts of their Christmas consumption practices, people may be able to experience more happiness.

Notably, however, individuals who attempted to limit their spending within their giving circle reported greater stress. Although our interpretation is speculative and *post hoc*, it may be that such practices bring stress when all members of the family do not agree to maintain such limits. Anecdotes certainly suggest that grandparents do not cut back on presents for grandchildren, despite the pleas of parents. Further, Caplow (1984) believes that shopping and gift giving are important ways by which individuals maintain social networks and abide by the largely unacknowledged rules of the season. Perhaps limiting one’s purchases creates stress because of a failure to express affection to one’s relatives.

Age and gender were also associated with holiday well-being. Older individuals reported greater Christmas happiness, although this effect was largely explained by more frequent experiences of religion and lessened salience of receiving. Males in the current study also reported having a merrier Christmas than did females, although we were unable to identify the processes responsible for this effect. Although females are more involved in holiday shopping (Caplow, 1982), they were not more likely than men to report that spending was a salient holiday experience. The fact that well-being differences between the genders were most notable for the outcomes of stress and NA suggests that the result may reflect females’ general tendency to report more negative experiences (Costa et al., 2001) than men. That is, perhaps women typically feel (or report feeling) more stress and more NA, and this generalizes to their experiences of Christmas.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Future research could correct for several limitations of the present study. For example, it would have been helpful to measure people's baseline well-being to understand how it relates to happiness during the holiday; this might especially elucidate the role of gender in CWB. Our sample was also rather small and homogenous, so research with larger samples from other US subcultures, and from other nations, would help to expand the generalizability of these results. We also believe it is important to test the generalizability of these results to the well-being of children during Christmas. Children receive about seven times more gifts than they give (Caplow, 1982) and many adults claim that the season is "for the kids." Would the relative salience of materialistic experiences be negatively related to well-being in a sample of children and early adolescents?

Another limitation of the current study is that we asked people to rate their experiences of Christmas after the holiday had occurred, yielding retrospective reports. It would be fascinating to conduct a study of CWB *in vivo* through experience sampling methods. Would people report more NA and stress while shopping, and more PA and satisfaction while engaging in religious activities, as the current results suggest? Or are these findings due to biases in participants' retrospective reports on their holiday experiences and happiness?

Although people reported slightly more PA when they donated to churches and charities, there was no relationship between the relative occurrence of helping others and CWB. This is a rather surprising finding, given the generally beneficial effects of a focus on helping the world (Kasser and Ryan, 1993), and Christ's injunction to help others. Perhaps helping others at Christmas is perceived by some as a burdensome obligation, given the many other stresses of the Christmas season. Future research could examine this question as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

The many values and behaviors of individuals and society are reflected in festivals such as Christmas (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989), which is why so many themes intermingle during the holiday. The current study investigated many of these themes, finding that family and religion provided the greatest benefit to holiday well-being, whereas the

secular, materialistic aspects of the holiday either contributed little to Christmas joy, or were associated with less happiness and more stress and unpleasant affect. Such findings fit well with research about how family, religion, and materialism relate to well-being during the rest of the year (Kasser, 2000; 2002; Myers, 2000) and suggest that the path to a merry Christmas comes not from purchasing many expensive gifts at the mall, wrapping them, and placing them under the tree, but instead from satisfying deeper needs to be close to one's family and find meaning in life.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We added "sad" to the list of NA items, as it is an emotion related to the "Christmas blues" but is not part of the 20-item PANAS.

<sup>2</sup> Because two means of recruitment were used to obtain this sample, we examined whether participants' sample membership (community or college student) might interact with the relative occurrences, money usage, or positive consumption practices variables in predicting well-being. As such explorations would have involved a large number of interactions if we examined for every well-being variable, we limited these analyses to the summary CWB variable. Of the analyses conducted, only two were significant at  $p < 0.05$ . The relative occurrence of sensual enjoyment was not associated with CWB for the students ( $r = -0.09$ , ns) but was for the community sample ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The expense of the gifts received as a percentage of one's income was negatively related to well-being for students ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but was non-significant for the community sample ( $r = 0.21$ , ns). These interactions should be interpreted with caution, as they were unpredicted and could be due to chance.

<sup>3</sup> We were also interested in whether the effects of gender on well-being might be mediated by any of the predictor variables, but none of the predictors which were related to well-being were also related to gender; thus, mediational analyses were not possible.

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