Exploring Psychological Desire and Craving Through First-Person Experience Sampling
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ABSTRACT
Buddhist philosophy provides novel theoretical insights into the relationship between desire and well-being. It suggests that destructive desires and cravings result from attaching to a particular self-concept. An autonomous view of the self supports recurring "self-focused" desires that only bring temporary pleasure and detract from psychological well-being. Recognizing that the "self" is a fluid and changing concept, however, can lead to "self-transcendent" desires that promote well-being. This research uses first-person experience sampling to examine people's daily experiences of desire and how these experiences are related to well-being. Whereas previous studies using this sampling method have focused on immediate biological or material desires, this research expands the focus to include more psychological "self-focused" and "self-transcendent" desires. An initial online study we conducted asked 121 participants "What do you want most right now, if anything?" We coded responses as biological (involving food, sleep, sex, health), material (involving money, material goods), psychological (involving lifestyle, well-being, less stress, achievement), or social (involving interacting with others). Many participants reported psychological desires (35%), while other participants reported material desires (35%), biological desires (21%), or social desires (8%). Furthermore, a small proportion of participants reported more "self-transcendent" desires directed towards another person (7%). To further examine desire and its relation to well-being in daily life, a smartphone application is being developed, in which participants report on their current desires, emotions, and stress at random points during their day for several weeks. This study will examine the relationship between desire and psychological well-being more directly.

INTRODUCTION
→ Western psychology defines desire as the subjective experience of wanting. Empirical attention on desire has focused mainly on biological or material desires that provide immediate gratification (eating, sleeping, spending) (Hoffmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012). This focus, however, does not capture all types of desire. We include other abstract/psychological desires experienced in everyday life.
→ Buddhist philosophy broadens the focus to include all types of desires as well as the origin of our "self-focused" wants. These recurring desires arise from an autonomous view of the "self" that can detract from psychological well-being (Ekman et al., 2005).
→ To fulfill our "self-focused" desires, we cling to objects, situations, and activities that support the notion of self as a source of happiness. These desires prove to be destructive because they only provide a short term fix. This creates a cycle of desires that is characterized by restlessness, grasping, anxiety, and unsatisfactoriness (Varela et al., 1991).
→ For example, wanting a pay raise or a good grade may cause momentary stress at random points during their day for several weeks. This study will examine the relationship between desire and psychological well-being more directly.

METHODS
→ Mechanical Turk
  - Posted a questionnaire task on the online system
  - Participants answered four questions
    - First question: "What do you want most right now (if anything)?"
→ Questionnaire
  - Participants answered four questions
  - First question: "What do you want most right now (if anything)?"
  - Further questions elaborated on intensity of their desire and affect
→ Coding Procedure
  - Desire responses were coded according to four categories:
    - Biological (involving food, sleep, sex, health)
    - Material (involving money, material goods)
    - Psychological (involving experiences related to lifestyle, well-being, less stress, achievement)
    - Social (involving interacting with others)
  - Desire responses were also differentiated based on focus on self or others

RESULTS
Percentages of desire regarding self versus other
- "I want my children to be happy and safe"
- "I want nothing more than to have my son’s surgery be successful"
- "I want to be self-employed and have more free time"
- "I want to live in a house surrounded by nature and the sea"

Percentages of desire
- "I want to be a famous soccer player in a real band"
- "I want to be self-employed and have more free time"
- "I want to be self-employed and have more free time"
- "I want to live in a house surrounded by nature and the sea"

Participants Who Wanted to Change Their Experience
- 28% Psychological
- 60% Material
- 83% Biological

Mechanical Turk
- Participants wanted to change their experience
- Psychological (61%), Material (20%), Biological (19%), Social (6%)

Psychological (35%)
- "I want some peace in my life"
- "I want to be happy and healthy"
- "I want to be self-employed and have more free time"
- "I want to live in a house surrounded by nature and the sea"

Social (8%)
- "I want to have a great relationship with a partner"
- "I want to change my experience" (64% of all participants wanted to change their experience)
- "I want to be self-employed and have more free time"
- "I want to live in a house surrounded by nature and the sea"

Mechanical Turk
- Participants received payment to complete the task
- Allowed for diverse sample of participants
- Discrepancies were resolved through discussion by all three coders

DISCUSSION
→ Previous research on desire has focused on the experience of concrete desires vs. "self-transcendent" desires and how they influence well-being
→ Our questionnaire data suggests that people experience abstract/psychological desires and that a majority of all desires were "self-focused"
→ A majority of participants wanted to change their current experience which supports the Buddhist idea that "self-focused" desires leads to unsatisfactoriness
→ To investigate this link, we will use a customized smartphone app to assess experience in daily life.
- Participants will be alerted randomly throughout the day
- They will be prompted to answer questions regarding what they want in that moment
- They will answer questions regarding how they feel in that moment
- After a certain number of responses, participants will receive feedback on their results in the form of graphs
- Data will reflect a diverse population and daily experiences of wanting and well-being

GOALS
→ How do we characterize the desires of diverse individuals?
→ How do we understand when desire promotes well-being and hinders well-being?