ABSTRACT: The present study investigated the relationship between desire for fame, narcissism, and Buddhist practices. A scale measuring the desire for fame was administered along with a scale measuring level of narcissism. The results suggest that Buddhists report a significantly lower desire for fame than non-Buddhists. Additionally, a significant relationship between narcissism and desire for fame was found. Buddhist principles (such as the de-emphasis of the ego) may help offset the potentially negative consequences associated with the pursuit of celebrity.

Fame has evolved considerably throughout the centuries. What once was a matter of birth right and inherited position prior to the eighteenth century has been transformed into a marker of talent, intellect, and personal virtue (Braudy, 1986). More recently, with the expansive audiences that mediums such as the internet, television, and movies reach, fame is easier to achieve, and in some ways, less meaningful than it was in the past. With the increase in popularity of reality television shows, people do not even have to be extraordinary in order to gain recognition. It seems as though fame is no longer an indicator of exceptional achievement. P. David Marshall (1997) expressed this perspective when he noted that “the success expressed in the celebrity posture is seen as success without the requisite association with work. There is no substance to the sign of the celebrity, and without that embedded significance, the celebrity sign is entirely image” (p. xi).

Even with the superficiality of the modern celebrity, some people still crave a taste of fame. In hungering for fame, what is it exactly that these individuals are hoping to gain? When fame has been attained, an individual will have entered a state of being in which they will experience large-scale public recognition for their talents, achievements, and/or personality while simultaneously becoming separated and admired by the crowd (Braudy, 1986). Hence, some of those who desire fame may yearn for an existence defined by the aggrandizement of the self accompanied by the adulation of this elevated self by the masses.

However, unbeknownst to many, desire for self-glorification may be quite harmful for some. This portion of the population precipitated our interest in pursuing our study. For example, in a study conducted by Adler and Adler (1989), athletes on a major college basketball team were observed over a five year period, beginning with their entry into the basketball program and ending with their conclusion of their
college basketball careers. The researchers were concerned with whether or not the players would experience changes in their selves as a result of their exposure to fame. While many of the players were never driven by the need to aggrandize the self prior to their immersion into the world of celebrity, once they were unavoidably placed in the eyes of the public, the desire to maintain and acquire even more recognition became intensified. All the players’ interest in outside responsibilities and relationships—school, relatives, friends—diminished, replaced by a self that was solely preoccupied with athletic fame as a source of gratification in their lives. Moreover, garnering additional fame from the present was so important to the players that their futures once their basketball careers had ended was given little consideration. Thus, engrossing oneself in the attempt to procure celebrity status can have significant effects on individuals.

If a person’s wish for fame does come to fruition, the life changes that occur when one is suddenly thrust into the public eye can also have detrimental psychological effects. For example, Schaller (1997) found significant effects of fame on self-consciousness by analyzing three cases of famous personalities—Kurt Cobain, Cole Porter, and John Cheever. The three celebrities analyzed were all classified as writers (two songwriters and one novelist), and it was theorized that their feelings of self-consciousness would be manifested in their work. Schaller hypothesized that exposure to fame would result in increased self-consciousness due to the fact that the selves of celebrities are constantly being scrutinized by the public. Indeed, a significant increase in self-consciousness before and after fame was found. These findings are not enough to imply causation of increased self-consciousness by fame, but they do suggest a potential for fame to have unwanted, undesirable effects on the mental health of those who gain public recognition.

Similarly, Estes (1998) utilized the eventual demise of Elvis Presley to illustrate the negative impact fame can have. Once in the public eye, a person can be both adored and despised by the public. In order to overcome the feelings of inadequacy that may result from hostile public opinion, the celebrity may become even more obsessed with acquiring public admiration. The celebrity may wrongly conclude that obtaining more respect from the public—something that elicits good feelings—will assuage feelings of insufficiency, becoming so immersed in the pursuit of public adulation that they lose themselves and a sense of what is really important. Fame, in such cases, may act like a pleasure-inducing drug, leaving those who experience it with an insatiable craving for more.

From the studies discussed above, one might infer that the desire for fame and fame itself have the potential to alter an individual’s life in possibly destructive ways. Yet, studies of fame have not established a causal link between fame and negative life effects. Most of the research has been anecdotal. It is possible, then, that the negative consequences experienced may be related to the extant personality of the individual seeking fame. For example, there are some who believe that they deserve recognition (both public and private) and that this recognition is something they are entitled to enjoy. Such thoughts can be indicators of a narcissistic personality.

Narcissism is a construct based upon a ‘‘cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self, where ‘cognitive preoccupation’ refers to a focus of attention on the self; ‘affec-
tive preoccupation’ refers to a preoccupation with one’s own needs, wishes, goals, ambitions, glory, superiority, or perfection; and ‘self’ refers to the whole person . . . ” (Westen, 1990, p. 227). Along with this fixation on the self, narcissistic individuals often feel threatened by a pervasive sense of impermanence of the self (McCarthy, 1997; Piven, 2003). They experience their felt sense of self as insignificant and thus seek the replacement of the transient self with a more “permanent” self. Fame, which offers the illusion of a concrete existence and a sense of fulfillment in being recognized (Braudy, 1986), becomes a manifestation of the permanence that the ego seeks (Falkenstrom, 2003). Thus, fame can give an individual a sense of immortality, creating a self that is no longer ephemeral.

However, from a Buddhist perspective, this pursuit of permanence is associated with suffering, not immortality (Rao, 1978; Tatsuo, 1999). In noting the association between ego pursuits and suffering, Epstein (1995) explained that “what the Buddha called the craving for existence and nonexistence, is what we would call today narcissistic craving: the thirst for a fixed image of the self, as either something or nothing” (p. 59). One of the principle objectives of Buddhism is to recondition the way in which the nature of the ego is perceived, moving away from the belief that the ego is eternal. If one adopts the practices of Buddhism, this desire of the ego to become permanent or immortal can be extinguished. In such a state, equivalent to that of enlightenment in which the ego has been annihilated, external validation of one’s existence is no longer needed (Kara, 1979).

In fact, desire itself is perceived by Buddhists as a negative force which must be quelled in order for suffering to be eliminated (Kalupahana, 1992). Much of the suffering that exists in the world is accredited to ignorance in Buddhist theory. Ignorance in its most powerful form, according to Buddhism, is to conceive of a self when in actuality there is no self or ego. Ensnared in this type of ignorance, people become obsessed with the ego, desperately clinging onto it with the misconception that such an entity is permanent when in reality it is transient (Kalupahana, 1992). Because of this position regarding the fleeting nature of the ego, the doctrine of no-self is the cornerstone for Buddhist thought and practice.

Certain Buddhist practices, such as Vipassana meditation, have been shown to create changes in self-concept by helping practitioners become aware of the “non-self” (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997). More specifically related to the present study, Epstein (1986) argues that meditation acts as a way in which narcissistic inclinations inherent in an individual’s personality are recognized, confronted, and thereby channeled into a healthier expression of these urges. Such a postulation counters the commonly-held view that meditation actually fosters narcissism, a gross misinterpretation of this ancient Buddhist practice (Epstein, 1990). Through the intense concentration and insight that meditation requires of its practitioners, the ideal ego—the part of the self that harbors the belief that it is deserving of admiration for what it is (Hanly, 1984)—is actually subdued, making it possible for the narcissistic preoccupation with the self to be abandoned (Epstein, 1986).

Perhaps exposure to a belief system that deemphasizes the importance of the self, such as Buddhism, might make an individual less likely to pursue any construct that results in the exaltation of the self, such as fame. Therefore, the present study was
designed to investigate whether individuals with a Buddhist background would report a lower desire for fame than those not affiliated with the teachings of Buddhism. A central feature of Buddhism allows individuals to be grounded in the pursuit of no-self versus the experiences of those whose pursuit for fame may evolve into self exaltation. In addition, it was expected a desire for fame would be related to the narcissistic personality, independent of exposure to Buddhist philosophy.

**Method**

**Participants**

Two groups of participants were studied. The Buddhist participants (N = 22) were recruited from a Buddhist temple outside of a major metropolitan area in the United States and from a Buddhist practice group from a nearby suburb. Participants from the non-Buddhist population (N = 21) were students at a small liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic. Participation in both groups was completely voluntary.

**Materials**

*Desire for Fame Measure.* The desire for fame scale was designed specifically for this study. It was comprised of 15 questions, based on a 5-point Likert-scale (from 1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree”). Examples of the questions include “I value my anonymity” and “I often fantasize about being famous.” The higher the calculated total score on the scale, the more desire for fame an individual possessed. A reliability analysis of the measure using the data in the current study yielded a Cronbach coefficient of .86, an indication of adequate reliability.

*O’Brien Multiphasic Narcissism Inventory.* This measure (O’Brien, 1987) was designed to evaluate three dimensions of narcissism: Narcissistic Personality, Poisonous Pedagogy, and Narcissistically Abused Personality. There are a total of 41 questions in yes/no format with “yes” answers indicative of narcissistic tendencies. Only the Narcissistic Personality subscale (16 questions) was used in the present study because we were not interested in pathological dimensions of narcissism. A Cronbach coefficient of .76 was obtained, providing evidence of acceptable internal consistency (O’Brien, 1987).

**Procedure**

To collect data with the Buddhist participants, the primary researcher attended a temple gathering and asked individuals present at the function for their participation in the study. Once they agreed (n = 13), the researcher presented the participants with a packet including the Informed Consent form, the Desire for Fame scale, and the Narcissism scale. After the participant had completed the measures, the researcher thanked each participant for his or her cooperation.

In addition, the primary researcher attended a meeting of a Buddhist practice group to describe the research project. Later, an e-mail was sent to the group’s mailing list.
asking that those interested in participating in the project to e-mail the researcher. When an individual responded, expressing interest in participating \((n = 9)\), the researcher then e-mailed the informed consent form and the two surveys to the individual for completion.

Finally, for the non Buddhist group, students were recruited through undergraduate psychology classes \((n = 21)\). After informed consent forms were collected, participants were given the Desire for Fame measure and the Narcissism scale. Participants were then thanked by the researcher for their time and effort upon the participant’s completion of the surveys.

RESULTS

The total desire for fame each individual had was calculated for the Buddhist sample \((M = 29.36, SD = 8.65)\) and the non-Buddhist sample \((M = 36.71, SD = 7.96)\). In addition, narcissism scores were calculated for the Buddhist sample \((M = 5.09, SD = 2.84)\) and the non-Buddhist sample \((M = 6.19, SD = 1.97)\). Using a MANOVA (with Buddhist affiliation as the independent variable), the omnibus \(F\) was found to be significant \((F(2,40) = 4.10, p < .05, \eta = .17)\). Thus, two follow up one-way ANOVAs were conducted, which revealed a significant difference between the desire for fame in Buddhists and non-Buddhists, \(F(1,41) = 8.39, p < .01, \eta = .17\), suggesting that Buddhists desired fame significantly less than the non-Buddhists. There was no significant difference between the two groups on narcissism.

In addition, two correlations were conducted separately on the Buddhist and non-Buddhist sample with relation to the two dependent variables. For both groups, there was a significant correlation between narcissism and desire for fame (for Buddhists, \(r = .49, p < .05\), and for the non-Buddhists, \(r = .48, p < .05\)). To test for the presence of a significant difference in the correlation across the two groups, we conducted a Fisher’s \(r\) to \(Z\) Transformation (Ferguson, 1976; Jaccard & Becker, 1997); however, the results were not significant, suggesting that the two groups had a roughly equivalent association between narcissism and desire for fame. Thus, the two groups were combined for a final two-tailed Pearson’s correlation, which indicated an overall significant correlation between desire for fame and narcissism, \(r = .52, p < .01\). The more desire for fame an individual reported, the more narcissistic tendencies he or she displayed.

DISCUSSION

Fame and the desire to acquire it have not been given very much attention in the field of psychology, as made apparent by the lack of research pertaining to fame. What little research that is available on fame has primarily investigated the consequences of celebrity status once it has been attained (Adler & Adler, 1989; Schaller, 1997). Continually being overlooked in the scientific literature is the drive to procure public recognition and the adverse effects it can have on the lives of individuals. This disregard for the preoccupation with obtaining fame persists despite convincing arguments that fame is not the ideal goal that it is often perceived to be (Braudy, 1986; Estes, 1998; Giles, 2000; Marshall, 1997; Orth, 2004). Furthermore, not
everyone possesses this intense desire to gain celebrity status; some are afflicted by it more than others.

The present study delved into this notion of individual differences in the desire for fame by investigating whether or not the presence of a particular belief system would affect the levels of desire for fame in individuals. Buddhism was chosen as the belief system to examine the degree of the desire for fame present in different individuals. The tenets of Buddhism advocate a diminution of all earthly desires and minimization of the amount of attention bestowed upon the ego (Kalupahana, 1992; Lopez, 2002). Fame serves as a medium through which the ego can gain a sense of permanence. Because the teachings of Buddhism deemphasize the existence of the ego and aim to eradicate desires in general, it was predicted that individuals who practice Buddhism would possess less of a desire for fame than those individuals who do not engage in Buddhist practices. The results of the study supported this hypothesis.

Despite the significant findings, there are a few limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the inherent cultural differences of people who practice Buddhism may serve as a confound. Many of the participants in the Buddhist sample were of Thai descent. Asian cultures tend to display a more collectivist approach towards life, de-emphasizing the importance of the individual (Chang, 1982). Fame as a glorification of the individual may be more of a Western notion stemming from the individualistic nature of the culture.

Continuing with possible limitations attributed to cultural differences, language barriers for the participants of Thai descent could also have created difficulties in the comprehension and interpretation of the surveys administered by the researchers. Participants whose native language was Thai may have had trouble fully understanding the statements of the surveys, which were written in English. Hence, their responses may have not been as accurate as they could have been if the researchers had provided surveys that had been translated into the Thai language.

Furthermore, regardless of the participants’ cultural background, the degree to which the participants were committed to the principles of Buddhism was not measured. Not knowing such a statistic makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not the findings were attributed solely to an individual’s dedication to Buddhist doctrines. For example, there may be individuals within the Buddhist sample who possess virtually no desire for fame, but are not as committed to Buddhism as others in the group.

Finally, age was not empirically collected, but participants in the non-Buddhist group were mainly college students in their late teens and early twenties, while the Buddhist population was mostly people of middle-age. Thus, both samples were homogenous in the age groups they represented, but two completely different generations were being compared. It is possible that younger people may be more susceptible to dreams of fame and recognition. Future research could look directly at whether or not a relationship may exist between age and an individual’s desire for fame.
With regard to the null finding for narcissism levels between the Buddhist and non-Buddhist subgroups, the concept of spiritual materialism can be applied in order to provide a potential explanation for this lack of significance. Often after an extended period of spiritual practice, many laypeople will believe that they have reached a state of higher spiritual awareness. When cognitions such as these arise, it is often indicative of the ego slyly manifesting itself in an area where one would otherwise conclude it incapable of existing (Trungpa, 1973). Evading this mental trap formulated by the ego requires practitioners to persist with their training despite the enticing notion that they have transcended an earthly state of consciousness, embarking upon a more elevated state of awareness. With that being said, perhaps the majority of the participants in the Buddhist sample had arrived at the point in their practice where they experienced spiritual materialism, but had not yet overcome the ego’s manipulative and deceptive ways. Hence, these individuals may have unknowingly continued to bolster the existence of the ego which, in turn, made them no less narcissistic than those who did not practice Buddhism.

While we acknowledge that the small sample size reduces the generalizability of the results, it is our hope that others will find our results intriguing and be interested in furthering this area of investigation. For example, limitations aside, the findings of the present study pose interesting implications about the potential effects the teachings of Buddhism can have on an individual’s desire for fame. The main idea that the results suggest is that the presence of the Buddhist belief system in an individual’s life is indeed associated with lower desire to garner celebrity status. As discussed earlier, craving fame and fame itself can potentially create very serious problems for an individual. Even though fame-related goals and ambitions loom as possible threats to the well-being of individuals’ lives, the specific effects and the extent to which the effects are negative have not yet been empirically studied. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to determine if there is an association between a high level of desire for fame and an individual’s mental health status. Possible topics to explore could include the relationship of desire for fame and depression, difficulty in interpersonal relationships, substance abuse, and life satisfaction.

Once it has been empirically established that there is indeed a correlation between the preoccupation with acquiring fame and adverse mental conditions, the next step in the research would be to unearth an understanding of why certain individuals are more susceptible to developing an obsessive desire for gaining fame and recognition. The present study touched upon this question by examining reported narcissism levels in relation to desire for fame. A strong relationship between narcissistic personality and desire for fame was found. However, other personality differences could have contributed to this finding. Because of this possibility, another potential area for future research would be comparison between the levels of desire for fame in extraverted and introverted individuals. Extraverts naturally tend to gravitate towards being the center of attention while introverts prefer to remain anonymous in their actions (Watson & Clark, 1997). Given these disparities in characteristics of extraverts and introverts, it would make sense that being classified as one or the other of the personality types could be related to an individual’s desire to be in the public eye.

Additionally, investigating the effects of the application of Buddhist practices to
individual cases involving elevated levels of the desire for fame should be pursued. By incorporating certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy into one’s lifestyle, liberation from the need for fame may be obtained. This is not to say that conversion to Buddhism or strict adherence to all its doctrines is being proposed, but rather that serious consideration of what Buddhist principles have to offer the mental health of many troubled individuals should be given. To be more specific, meditation could be suggested for those individuals possessing a high level of desire for fame. There is some empirical support for the idea that meditation does create resistance to the effects of external stimuli (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997). These findings imply that meditation might indeed be successful in diminishing the intensity of an individual’s desire for fame; however, additional empirical support would be useful.

In conclusion, although little attention or empirical research has been devoted to the phenomenon of desire for fame, it is our hope that the present study will initiate more interest in the psychological effects that desiring fame can have on some individuals as well as in possible remedies for the culture’s growing obsession with public recognition. With more empirical documentation of the consequences of fame, we can begin to gain a deeper understanding of this unique, potentially harmful desire that has so captivated many individuals in modern society.

REFERENCES


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