



The portrait of a hedonist: The personality and ethics behind the value and maladaptive pursuit of pleasure



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ABSTRACT

Hedonism is the prioritizing of pleasure over other life values and is theorized to be independent of well-being. However, popular culture depicts hedonists as unhappy, as well as selfishly unconcerned with others' well-being. Because the current literature has not differentiated between people's value of pleasure and their maladaptive pursuit of it, we examined if these related, but not equivalent, dispositions had different personality and morality profiles. We found that value-based hedonists have a distinct moral profile (i.e., they are less likely to endorse moral foundations associated with social conservatism) and, yet, they differ little from others in regard to personality traits. We also found that people's maladaptive hedonism (i.e., excessive pleasure-seeking) was best predicted by their personality traits (i.e., being less agreeable, less conscientious, and more neurotic) rather than by their conceptions of right and wrong. We discuss how these results contribute to our understanding of hedonism and why some people pursue their value of pleasure into over-indulgence.

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When everybody else refrained, my uncle Jonny did cocaine.
[Lyrics from *Uncle Jonny* by Brandon Flowers]

1. Introduction

One famous fictional hedonist is Oscar Wilde's character Dorian Gray, an impulsive and selfish man whose pleasure-seeking is so excessive that it leaves him deeply unhappy (Wilde, 1931). Hedonism, according to Schwartz (1992), is a person's prioritizing of pleasure as a goal relative to other potentially important goals. That is, a person who scores high on Schwartz's (1992) measure of hedonism values the pursuit of pleasure more than universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, stimulation, and self-direction. However, a point of divergence between popular culture and personality research is that popular culture depicts hedonists as unhappy while there is no empirical evidence of ill-adjustment among people who value the pursuit of pleasure. In fact, Sagiv and Schwartz (2000) theorized that people can achieve happiness through attaining the out-

comes they value, and it is relatively common for positive psychologists to specifically prescribe the intentional pursuit of frequent positive affect, given its many benefits (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Therefore, in theory, a person who values pleasure should feel as happy upon experiencing pleasure, as the person who values power should feel upon gaining power.

Instead, prior findings suggest a negative relationship between well-being and proxies of pleasure-seeking that fit the lay conception of excessive hedonism (i.e., seeking pleasure in activities without caring for the meaning and self-development they may provide; Huta & Ryan, 2010; focusing on present pleasure with little regard for past events or future consequences; Zhang & Howell, 2011). It would seem then that the "Dorian Grays" of the world, or people whose pursue pleasure to their detriment (i.e., maladaptive hedonists), are different from people who, in principle, believe that the pursuit of pleasure is important. Of course, a positive relationship may still exist between maladaptive pleasure-seeking and valuing hedonism; however, these two dispositions may not overlap enough to correspond to the same personality and ethical profile of an individual—that is, there may be important differences between people who value pleasure and people who overdo it. Therefore, this investigation will differentiate between valuing pleasure and excessive pleasure-seeking in order to understand the inconsistencies previously observed between Schwartz's (1992) value of pleasure and personality traits, as well as ethics.

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1.1. Hedonists' personality

Overall, the reported associations between personality traits and the value of pleasure have been inconsistent. For example, while [Schwartz \(2006\)](#) theorized that people's value of pleasure does not necessarily dampen the quality of their social interaction, previous research on valuing pleasure and agreeableness (i.e., kindness, sympathy, and consideration of others; see [Rammstedt & John, 2007](#)) has reported both no relationship between valuing pleasure and agreeableness ([Olver & Mooradian, 2003](#)) as well as a negative relationship ([Luk & Bond, 1993](#); among Chinese university students). There also exists an inconsistency in the observed relationships between conscientiousness (i.e., extent to which people are dependable, thorough, and vigilant; see [Rammstedt & John, 2007](#)) and the value of pleasure. Particularly, some studies have found no relationship ([Olver & Mooradian, 2003](#)) and others a negative one ([Luk & Bond, 1993](#)). Additionally, although the value of pleasure is theoretically related to the value of stimulation ([Schwartz, 1992](#)), previous research ([Luk & Bond, 1993](#); [Olver & Mooradian, 2003](#)) has found no relationship between the value of pleasure and liking of social stimulation specifically (i.e., extraversion; [Rammstedt & John, 2007](#)).

Further, [Schwartz \(1992\)](#) theorized that people who value pleasure are more open to change than those who do not. However, research on personality traits and values has found no relationship between people's value of pleasure and openness ([Luk & Bond, 1993](#); [Olver & Mooradian, 2003](#)), a personality trait manifested in appreciation of adventure and variety ([Rammstedt & John, 2007](#)). Yet, another investigation suggested that people who value pleasure are more motivated to approach new experiences (rather than avoid them) and to seek novelty, as opposed to those who do not value pleasure ([Athota & O'Connor, 2014](#)). Finally, [Athota & O'Connor \(2014\)](#) reported that people who score high on value-based hedonism also experience more difficulty in managing their emotions than people who score low. Conversely, [Huta and Ryan \(2010\)](#) found that people's tendency to seek pleasure in their activities correlated positively with how carefree they felt on a daily basis, implying that pleasure-seekers should score low on neuroticism (characterized by anxiety and emotional instability; [Rammstedt & John, 2007](#)).

Importantly, all this prior research has not examined the relationship between personality traits and maladaptive pleasure-seeking. However, in line with the popular conception of hedonists as selfish and manipulative, we expect people who maladaptively pursue pleasure, compared to those who merely value it, to score lower on agreeableness. Additionally, the lay conception of hedonists suggests that they often give into the impulses (low conscientiousness) and are driven by their unstable emotions and perpetual dissatisfaction (high neuroticism). Finally, an open question remains as to whether people's excessive indulgence in pleasure, not simply their value of it, corresponds to their open-mindedness versus fixation on familiar experiences. Consequently, the present research examines whether a value of pleasure and the tendency to maladaptively pursue it are differentially related to openness.

1.2. Hedonists' moral foundations

Yet another important distinction between people who value pleasure over other goals and those who pursue it to excess may be their moral profiles. If maladaptive hedonists are willing to make more sacrifices (e.g., in social relationships or responsibilities) for pleasure than value-based hedonists, they may assign less moral relevance to protecting others' well-being, self-control, and the general following of societal rules. This lay conception of hedonism suggests that maladaptive pleasure-seekers have a different moral compass. However, the potential self-indulgence or carelessness

of maladaptive hedonists may instead reflect only their personality traits, as opposed to their beliefs of what is right and wrong. If maladaptive hedonistic behavior is merely an extreme manifestation of valuing pleasure, then only value-based hedonism should reflect a distinct moral profile and maladaptive hedonism by itself could be morally "neutral."

Previous research has found inconsistent patterns in regard to the moral profile of pleasure seekers, and this investigation into the moral principles of value-based versus maladaptive hedonists may also speak to these inconsistencies. For instance, [Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, and Klein \(2006\)](#) found that people who valued pleasure were more likely to commit white-collar crime than those who prioritized other life values. However, [Schwartz](#) found that people's value of pleasure had no relationship with their cooperative behavior (1996) and surprisingly a positive relationship with political activism often oriented toward social justice (e.g., contacting politicians or boycotting products; 2006). These inconsistencies elucidate the need to investigate the moral profiles of value-based hedonists (i.e., the principles through which they conceptualize morality). Also, more research is needed to understand whether people's value of pleasure in itself predicts their concern for others' well-being: are value-based hedonists really selfish or do they simply believe pleasure is important?

1.3. Current study

To examine the personality and ethical differences between people who simply prioritize pleasure over other values and those who pursue it maladaptively, the present research aims to assess the latter with a different measure of hedonism—one that correlates negatively with well-being. Such a measure of maladaptive pleasure-seeking should have a moderately strong relationship with the value of pleasure (i.e., [Schwartz's hedonism](#)), which itself is predicted to be independent of well-being ([Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000](#)). Moreover, we intend to assess maladaptive hedonism specifically, as opposed to people's general tendency to act impulsively or their unreliability (i.e., characteristics reflected when self-control is lacking). That is, we aim to demonstrate that maladaptive hedonism, though likely negatively correlated with self-control, is divergent from self-control. After demonstrating that value-based hedonism and maladaptive hedonism are distinct from each other as well as from self-control, we will compare the relationships of valued-based versus maladaptive hedonism with personality traits and moral profiles.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Sample 1 consisted of volunteer participants who completed one or more surveys on the educational website [BeyondThePur-chase.Org](#) (previously used as source of data for published research; see [Zhang, Howell, Caprariello, & Guevarra, 2014](#)). Among all eligible participants, we focused on the subsets who completed either (a) the Maladaptive Hedonism Questionnaire and the Schwartz Value Inventory ($N = 149$), (b) the Maladaptive Hedonism Questionnaire and the Satisfaction with Life Scale ($N = 1,038$), (c) the Schwartz Value Inventory and the Satisfaction with Life Scale ($N = 397$), (d) the Maladaptive Hedonism Questionnaire and the Big Five Inventory-10 ($N = 921$), or the (e) the Schwartz Value Inventory and the Big Five Inventory ($N = 149$). The participants who were included ($N = 1,580$; $M_{age} = 31.52$, $SD = 14.36$; 71.0% female; 67.9% Caucasian) were similar in age, gender composition, and ethnic background to the rest of the

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