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Mindfulness in Social Psychology

Edited by JOHAN C. KARREMANS
and ESTHER K. PAPIES

ROUTLEDGE

MINDFULNESS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Scientific interest in mindfulness has expanded in recent years, but it has typically been approached from a clinical perspective. This volume brings recent mindfulness research to classic social psychology topics such as romantic relationships, prejudice, prosocial behaviour, achievement, and self-control. Written by renowned scholars in social psychology, it combines a comprehensive research overview with an in-depth analysis of the processes through which mindfulness affects people's daily life experiences. It provides theoretical and methodological guidance for researchers across disciplines and discusses fundamental processes in mindfulness, including its effect on emotion regulation, executive control, automatic and deliberative processing, and its relationship to self-construal and self-identity. This book will be of particular interest to upper-level students and researchers in social psychology, health psychology, and clinical psychology, as well as social work and psychology professionals.

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WHY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGISTS SHOULD CARE ABOUT MINDFULNESS

Johan C. Karremans and Esther K. Papies

Why social psychologists should care about mindfulness

Over the past 30 years, the concept of mindfulness has found its way into mainstream psychological science. Initially, research approached mindfulness mainly from clinical and neurocognitive perspectives, focusing on its potential stress-buffering effects and the prevention and reduction of depressive symptoms. Mindfulness, however, may have much broader implications, and these are increasingly recognized by scientists. As noted by Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the pioneering scholars in this field, "mindfulness [. . .] has profound relevance for our present-day lives" (1994, p. 3). Mindfulness not only may impact a general sense of well-being and health, but may affect daily activities like eating, sleeping, and learning; it may affect our emotions, our goals, and the decisions we make; and it may affect our sense of self and how we interact with and relate to other people.

Social psychology is the science of everyday human behaviour, and not surprisingly then, interest in mindfulness has started to increase among social psychologists as well. Yet, while articles on this topic appear regularly in the main social psychology journals, the concept is still studied by only a relatively small subgroup of social psychologists. In this chapter, we reach out to a broader audience and argue that the concept of mindfulness may have important implications for a wide variety of topics that are traditionally studied by social psychologists. We first provide a brief historical background, and we discuss what mindfulness is, and what it is not. Reviewing recent mindfulness research on social psychological topics, we then discuss how social psychology as a field could benefit from engaging with mindfulness for theory, empirical research, and applications. Finally, we will discuss how mindfulness researchers in turn could profit from integrating social psychological theory and methodology into their work. In doing so, we hope to inspire constructive cross-talk between the fields.

A brief history of mindfulness in Western science

The concept of mindfulness was introduced in Western psychology in the late 70s by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a medical scientist at the University of Massachusetts. Rooted in Buddhist contemplative traditions and teachings (for an extensive discussion, see Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013), Kabat-Zinn developed a secular mindfulness-training program. Using meditation exercises and psycho-education, participants gradually learn to stabilize their attention to increase moment-to-moment awareness of body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, and to approach these experiences non-judgementally and with curiosity. Initially developed to treat patients with chronic pain, over the years a large number of participants around the world have participated in mindfulness-based training programs for a wide variety of reasons, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and stress; sleeping problems; rumination; impulsivity and aggressive tendencies; concentration problems; or simply for personal and spiritual growth.

In the wake of the growing popularity of these programs in Western society, a first wave of mindfulness research emerged. Clinical studies started to evaluate the effectiveness of the training programs, and of mindfulness meditation practice more generally, for issues such as depression relapse prevention (Teasdale, Segal, & Williams, 1995), the treatment of anxiety disorders (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995), and quality of life among chronic pain patients (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985). While the evaluation of mindfulness-based interventions with regard to individual health and well-being is still a rapidly expanding field of research, mindfulness-related techniques have already been incorporated into various forms of clinical practice (e.g. acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy; see Baer, 2015).

Once support for the effectiveness of mindfulness in promoting psychological well-being had accumulated, a second wave of inquiry – roughly the past 15 years – concentrated on the more specific question of *how* the effects of mindfulness emerge. For example, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists started to examine the cognitive and neural underpinnings of mindfulness, finding evidence that mindfulness is associated with increases in executive control (Teper, Segal, & Inzlicht, 2013; see also Elkins-Brown, Teper, & Inzlicht, Chapter 5 in this volume), attentional control (Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008), and structural changes in brain areas associated with such functions (e.g. Davidson et al., 2003; Hölzel et al., 2011; Zeidan et al., 2011). Moreover, as we will discuss in this chapter, researchers began paying increased theoretical and empirical attention to the specific psychological mechanisms that may be associated with mindfulness, such as changes in emotion regulation and empathy (e.g. Goldin & Gross, 2010; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010, respectively), and changes in perspectives on the self (see Leary & Diebels, Chapter 4 in this volume).

What is mindfulness – and what is it not?

But what exactly *is* mindfulness? Although a variety of definitions have been suggested, researchers most commonly define mindfulness as a state of paying conscious

attention to present-moment experiences with an open and non-judgemental attitude (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). In this definition, two components can be distinguished: 1) focusing *attention* on present-moment experiences, including bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotional states, and 2) approaching these experiences with a *non-judgemental* attitude, irrespective of their valence (Bishop et al., 2004). Thus, being mindful means observing one's immediate and current experiences, and acknowledge them for what they are in this present moment, or put differently, giving them *bare* attention (Epstein, 2008).[1]

Although this may sound relatively simple and easy to do, most people who have attempted to train this skill, through meditation or mindfulness training, have quickly found that it can be quite difficult. While important individual differences exist (see for example Alberts, Chapter 2 in this volume), various domains of research suggest that for many people a state of mindful awareness is not something that occurs naturally, nor often, in daily life. Some would even say that most of the time, people are and act in a state of *mindlessness*. For example, research on automaticity suggests that significant portions of our daily activities are guided by unconscious and automatic processes (Wyer, 2014). Moreover, the mind has an extremely strong tendency to wander, and without realizing it, people are typically engrossed in thoughts about the past or future, rather than the present moment, relating their experiences to their self-concepts (Farb et al., 2007) and making them unhappy (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). In addition, as soon as negative emotions or difficulties occur, many people have an automatic tendency to avoid or suppress the experience, turning their attention *away* from it (Gross & John, 2003). On top of this, people often judge, approach, and avoid objects and other people automatically, as social psychologists have convincingly shown (e.g. Chen & Bargh, 1999; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Herring et al., 2013).

All of these examples of mind*less*ness can be contrasted with a state of mindfulness, in which a person attends to and becomes aware of internal experiences and automatic response tendencies; the mind is not wandering but focused on the present moment; and one is turning attention *towards* experiences – whether negative, neutral, or positive – receptive to whatever is going on in mind and body, with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgement. In other words, a state of mindfulness can be described as a state in which one takes a *decentered* meta-cognitive perspective on one's current-moment experiences, including one's thoughts and feelings about the self, rather than immediately responding to them (e.g. Bishop et al., 2004). To give an example: One may observe that, at this very moment, there is an emotional tone of anger, that there is tension in the body, that there are thoughts about revenge, and perhaps behavioural inclinations to aggress. Instead of immersing oneself in these experiences, in a mindful state, one's perspective shifts from "within one's subjective experience onto that experience" (p. 599; Bernstein et al., 2015), which may fundamentally change how these experiences affect us, and may provide one with more 'freedom' of how to respond next.

Before we start discussing how this all may be applied to social psychological theory and research, it is helpful to consider briefly how mindfulness can be distinguished from related concepts, particularly those that have been studied extensively

in social psychology (for a more extensive discussion, see Brown & Ryan, 2003). First, some of these concepts also entail attention and awareness, most notably self-monitoring and self-awareness. *Self-monitoring* refers to the capacity to observe and evaluate one's behaviour against a set of standards or norms (Snyder, 1974), allowing one to adjust one's behaviour accordingly. Relatedly, *self-awareness* refers to the ability to recognize one's feelings, behaviours, and traits, and evaluate and compare them to internal standards (Wicklund, 1975). While there is some overlap of these concepts with mindfulness in that the focus of attention is on internal experiences, mindfulness critically differs from them as it not concerned with standards or norms. It entails the observing of direct experience *not* through an evaluative lens, without trying to understand the experience or having the immediate intention of changing it. Second, while mindfulness requires the regulation of attention, and mindfulness can promote successful self-regulation (see Elkins-Brown et al., Chapter 5 in this volume), it should not be equated with self-regulation or self-control. Whereas self-control entails the active down-regulation of emotions or impulses, mindfulness means to simply observe them as they are, with no other goal than simply observing – even though almost paradoxically, this often facilitates their regulation. Finally, it is important to mention that the concept of mindfulness discussed in this volume differs from Langer's conceptualization of mindfulness (Langer, 1989), which refers to mindfulness as the ability to "notice new things", not determined by old routines or rules, when paying full momentary attention to one's surroundings. While the concepts overlap in the sense that they both entail paying attention with an open and curious mind, the concept of mindfulness we refer to is concerned with non-judgemental, meta-cognitive attention to the nature of one's momentary experiences (not the external world per se).

These differences from self-related concepts typically studied by social psychologists reflect the fact that while psychological research traditionally is concerned with studying the consequences of particular *contents* of consciousness (e.g. certain biases, specific thoughts, specific emotions, and so forth), mindfulness is concerned with the *nature* of people's cognitive processes and experiences, rather than their specific content. As a result, mindfulness as an intervention technique is also distinct from typical emotion regulation techniques like reappraisal, which focus on changing the content of one's thoughts or experiences. Instead, mindfulness is concerned with changing how one perceives and relates to the contents of consciousness (e.g. experiencing them as 'real' vs. accepting them as mere mental events). As will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, this can have important implications for how one is affected by and responds to thoughts and emotions.

The value of mindfulness for social psychological research

What is the potential value of studying mindfulness for understanding everyday human behaviour? Why should social psychologists care about mindfulness? We propose that mindfulness is relevant for social psychologists because it has implications for social psychological theory, particularly where automaticity and

self-relatedness are concerned, and it has important implications for applications to positively affect people's lives.

Implications for social psychological theory

As noted by Barsalou (Chapter 3 in this volume), mindfulness's distinct focus on *attention* to internal experiences has important consequences for the interplay of automatic and controlled processes. Mindfulness also directly affects self-related processes (e.g. Leary & Diebels and Elkins-Brown et al., Chapters 4 and 5 in this volume). These basic constructs – automaticity and self – are central to most social psychological theories or models, and are crucial to understanding real life human behaviour.

Mindfulness and automatic versus controlled responding

The brain's capacity to regulate behaviour automatically and unconsciously is highly adaptive. Habitual and automatic response patterns can be extremely powerful in guiding us through life in a relatively effortless manner, allowing us to respond accurately and without much deliberation to the social and non-social environment (e.g. Custers & Aarts, 2010). At the same time, however, habitual and *mindless* responding may be at the root of various problems and challenges an individual may encounter in life. As discussed by Barsalou (Chapter 3 in this volume), life-long conditioned responses often remain unattended and outside of conscious awareness, while such responses may not necessarily be most effective in terms of increasing one's own well-being, or the well-being of relationships with others.

Typically, psychological theories assume that an automatically triggered behavioural response will be enacted. However, theorizing and research in mindfulness shows this link can be broken if attention is directed purposefully at the behavioural impulses themselves. Indeed, one of the central ideas of mindfulness is that it increases awareness of impulses, and while accepting these experiences as being merely transient mental events, an individual is able to prevent automatically acting on them, and can reconsider how to respond most effectively to his or her environment. In other words, mindfulness points to the potential for controlled processes to regulate automatic processes in novel ways – not by focusing on the *content* of thought, but by directing attention to their *nature* as mere mental events.

The chapters in this volume offer several examples of how mindfulness can reduce automatic responding and thus affect daily life outcomes. Papies (Chapter 7 in this volume) provides an overview of research suggesting that mindfulness can affect health-relevant behaviour, including healthy eating, smoking, and alcohol use. To explain such findings, she discusses how mindfulness promotes the monitoring of automatic impulses and cravings that often play a critical role in unhealthy behaviour. Becoming consciously aware of such impulses is a first prerequisite to reduce the otherwise automatic link between impulse and behavioural response (e.g. *mindlessly* lighting a cigarette when the impulse arises; *mindlessly* emptying a

bag of potato chips in a habitual snacking situation). Importantly, however, a second prerequisite for not reacting to the impulse is to observe it from *a non-judgemental and decentered perspective*, which often allows the impulse to dissipate before it turns into actual behaviour.

Karremans and Kappen (Chapter 8 in this volume) discuss how a similar process may occur in the context of close relationships. Again, smooth interactions between partners may be guided by habitual responses, but certain habitual patterns may be the cause of relationship trouble. For example, as major social-psychological theories in relationship science recognize (e.g. interdependence theory; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996), automatic tendencies to reciprocate a partner's negative behaviour can result in downward spirals of negativity, and often are at the heart of relationship decline. The ability to take a mindful and decentered perspective – paying close *attention* to feelings and action tendencies that arise in the present moment – should weaken the otherwise automatic association between impulses and outward behaviour toward the partner. More generally, although the role of attention to experiences that gives rise to experiential awareness has received little theoretical or empirical attention in relationship science, it may be an essential part of explaining the difference between ill- and well-functioning relationships.

Berry and Brown (Chapter 11 in this volume) discuss research indicating that mindfulness can positively affect intergroup prosociality by a similar process of de-automatizing. As the authors note, awareness of prejudiced responses is a crucial first step to attenuate the expression of prejudiced responses. Theory and research in the domain of prejudice and stereotyping clearly recognize the role of a *lack* of awareness of the activation of prejudiced feelings and impulses, or stereotypes, and of how this activation then automatically affects behaviour. Mindfulness may increase the ability to become aware of prejudiced feelings and impulses or the activation of a stereotype, allowing the mindful observer to "let it pass without reacting to it or acting on it" (p. 438; see Cox, Abramson, Devine, & Hollon, 2012). Thus, together, these examples illustrate how mindfulness and its intrinsic attention-related processes may weaken the automatic impulse-behaviour link and as such benefit individual, interpersonal, and intergroup outcomes.

Another way in which mindfulness may affect individual and interpersonal outcomes is its inverse relationship with mind-wandering (Mrazek, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2012). As most people probably have experienced, the mind has a strong and natural tendency to wander during whatever activity one engages in, which sometimes may hinder task-performance. Research indicates that mindfulness training is associated with noticing mind-wandering at earlier stages, allowing one to bring back attention to the task at hand (Mrazek et al., 2013). Mrazek and colleagues (Chapter 10 in this volume) discuss how the training of mindfulness in schools may increase sustained attention and hence improve academic achievement. These findings suggest that mindfulness can break the automaticity of task-unrelated cues leading to distraction and mind-wandering, with potential long-term benefits.

Health behaviour, close relationships, prejudice, and academic achievement are only a few examples of areas where mindfulness may have important consequences

by affecting the interplay between automaticity and controlled processes. As future research should explore further, mindfulness may play a similar role in various other areas of social psychology where automaticity and controlled processing play prominent roles, such as attitude formation and change, social influence, cooperation and competition, impression formation, attribution processes, justice, social comparison, economic decision-making, and so on.

Mindfulness and self-related processes

As much as social psychology is concerned with the interplay of automatic and controlled processing, it is concerned with self-related processes. Constructs like self-esteem, self-construal, self-verification, self-enhancement, self-affirmation, self-perception, self-knowledge, and self-identity are topics that have been examined extensively in social psychology. This illustrates the emphasis in (Western) social psychological science on the self, and perhaps reflects a focus on the self in Western individualistic cultures more generally.

Leary and Diebels (Chapter 4 in this volume; see also Barsalou, Chapter 3 in this volume) argue that a change in how self-relevant information is processed may be at the core of many effects of mindfulness. Typically, people identify strongly with their experiences. Thoughts, sensations, and emotions are experienced as an integral part of the self (Bernstein et al., 2015), and produce a state that could be described as *subjective realism,* as the content of one's thoughts is experienced as reality (see Lebois et al., 2015; Papies, Pronk, Keesman, & Barsalou, 2015). While this may facilitate effective situated action (e.g. Barsalou, 2002), and support the construction of a coherent account of one's 'self' (Farb et al., 2007), this tendency is also associated with stress, rumination, and problematic cravings (e.g. Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005; Lebois et al., 2016).

In contrast, the decentered perspective that mindfulness entails facilitates a less immersed observing of the content of consciousness (see Hölzel et al., 2011, for an extensive discussion). For example, rather than being absorbed in distress, anger, or guilt, one observes these emotions as they arise and pass. The thoughts about one's self as a stable and 'real' construct can be observed from that perspective, too, which may decrease one's attachment to the static sense of self, or even lead to seeing it as an illusion (see Hölzel et al., 2011). As noted by Leary and Diebels (p. 53, in this volume), "mindfulness does not eliminate self-awareness or make people 'self-less'. Rather, it changes the amount and nature of self-attention and self-thought to be less self-focused and self-interested than it typically is."

Again, this should have important implications for various domains of social-psychological theory and research. Mindfulness may reduce self-defensive responding across various situations. For example, both prejudice, stereotyping, and interpersonal aggression have been argued to result at least partly from defending the self as part of an in-group and the desire to uphold a favourable view of the self, especially when provoked (e.g. Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Tajfel, 1981; see Berry & Brown, Chapter 11 in this volume). Hence, by promoting a decentered perspective

toward one's self-concept and one's experiences, mindfulness may reduce prejudice and less interpersonal aggression. Similar effects may be observed in other areas where self-defensive mechanisms play a central role, as suggested by a number of prominent theories in social psychology (e.g. self-affirmation theory, cognitive dissonance theory, terror management theory, and social identity theory).

Through a similar process, the less self-focused, decentered mode that is associated with mindfulness provides more opportunities for taking the perspective of others. Berry and Brown (Chapter 11 in this volume) describe how this process may foster intergroup prosociality. Condon (Chapter 9 this volume) reviews some initial research findings indicating that mindfulness indeed can promote compassion and prosocial behaviour in an interpersonal context. More generally, research suggests that both trait mindfulness and mindfulness training are positively associated with perspective taking and empathy (Birnie et al., 2010). Possibly, these findings can be explained in terms of less self-focus (or, as Leary and Giebels refer to, in terms of a "hypo-egoic mindset").

In sum, the research discussed so far suggests that changing attentional and self-related processes is a central effect of mindfulness, and engaging with mindfulness research may therefore provide useful insights for research in social psychology.

Implications for applications of social psychology

In addition to these theoretical and empirical contributions to modern social psychology, mindfulness may be of relevance to social psychologists because of the potential it offers for intervention tools that can fundamentally alter people's daily life experiences. This is particularly relevant as mindfulness-based interventions rely on the innate abilities of attention regulation and of taking a meta-cognitive perspective on one's own experiences, which are available to any human mind and can be tapped in a variety of ways. Indeed, the process of non-judgemental observation is not a skill that can be acquired through mindfulness training and meditation only, but is naturally available in human beings. Using attention skills, people have the unique ability to observe the content of consciousness, introspect, and adopt a meta-cognitive perspective on their experiences. While there seem to be considerable pre-existing individual differences (Brown & Ryan, 2003; see also Alberts, Chapter 2 in this volume), both attention regulation and meta-cognitive insight can be trained and cultivated further.

When developing interventions in the domains of health, relationship behaviour, workplace behaviour, stereotyping, intergroup contact, or others, social psychologists can capitalize on these existing abilities. The chapters in this volume provide numerous examples of how even brief or low-dose interventions enhance mindfulness skills enough to show meaningful behavioural effects. At the same time, the crucial mechanisms underlying mindfulness effects are not exclusive to meditation and mindfulness-based interventions. As a result, even interventions that are not explicitly 'mindfulness' can lead to benefits of improved attention regulation or a changed meta-cognitive perspective on one's experiences, and to associated

effects on cognition and behaviour (for examples, see Kross, 2009; Luciano et al., 2011). Thus, in addition to contributing to theory in social psychology, research on mindfulness can further inform applications to target critical societal issues.

The value of social psychology for mindfulness research and practice

While knowledge about the psychological and neurophysiological effects of mindfulness has expanded rapidly, considerable work remains to be done to fully understand *how* and *when* mindfulness works. For example, a basic social-psychological principle is that an individual's emotional and behavioural responses to others, and towards oneself, result from the individual's construal of the situation. How mindfulness may affect such construal processes is largely unexplored territory, but we suggest that such research should be informed by existing social psychological theories. More generally, social psychology is strongly concerned with fine-grained analyses of the specific psychological mechanisms that underlie our experiences and behaviour. This volume presents various examples of how this may benefit mindfulness research. While the link between mindfulness and self-control has repeatedly been demonstrated, Elkins-Brown, Teper, and Inzlicht (Chapter 5 this volume) discuss in detail *how* mindfulness actually may improve self-control. In short, they argue that non-judgemental interoceptive awareness promotes the monitoring of conflict-related affect, which in turn should facilitate self-control. Similarly, based on a classic social-psychological model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), Slutsky, Rahl, Lindsay, and Creswell (Chapter 6 in this volume) discuss how mindfulness may impact emotion regulation at various stages of the model. Further, as discussed earlier, the chapters by Leary and Diebels and by Barsalou (Chapters 4 and 3 in this volume) describe how mindfulness effects can be better understood through closely analyzing self-related and attention-related processes. Thus, the process-focus that characterizes social psychological research can bring important insights to the field of mindfulness.

Moreover, social psychologists have a strong tradition of testing their theories experimentally. So far, a large number of studies in the mindfulness literature have examined the relationship between (often trait) mindfulness and other variables in correlational designs, making it impossible to draw conclusions about causality. Stronger evidence in support of mindfulness effects is derived from randomized controlled trials in clinical psychology, in which the effect of mindfulness training is contrasted with an active control condition (see Creswell, in press). However, based on such studies, it is difficult to deduce what specific elements of the training are responsible for the effect. As we will discuss in more detail, experimental paradigms in social psychology can advance the field by zooming in on the specific factors that drive mindfulness effects. In addition, social psychological research has produced various research tools to assess unconscious and implicit processes (see Gawronski & De Houwer, 2014) that constitute an important and emerging addition to current research findings in the field of mindfulness, which have traditionally been based mainly on explicit self-report measures.