



## Short Communication

The interaction of mindful awareness and acceptance in couples satisfaction<sup>☆</sup>Jennifer Krafft<sup>\*</sup>, Jack Haeger, Michael E. Levin

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## ABSTRACT

Past studies indicate that the awareness and acceptance facets of trait mindfulness both independently predict relationship satisfaction. However, this study hypothesized that the combination of awareness and acceptance might be a stronger contributor to relationship functioning than either in isolation. Regression analyses were used to test whether mindful awareness and acceptance interact in predicting couples satisfaction in a sample of dating or married college students ( $n = 138$ ). Acceptance was positively associated with couples satisfaction, while awareness was unrelated. These two mindfulness facets interacted such that greater awareness was related to poorer satisfaction when acceptance was low, but was unrelated when acceptance was high. Conversely, greater acceptance was only related to greater satisfaction when awareness was moderate or high. These results suggest the combination of high awareness and low acceptance can be problematic for relationships, while at least moderate mindful awareness is needed for acceptance to be beneficial.

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of evidence exists linking mindfulness to positive mental health outcomes (e.g. [Khouri et al., 2013](#)). One domain that has recently received more empirical attention is how mindfulness may affect romantic relationships. The capacity to be mindfully aware of ongoing experience and to relate to one's experience in a non-judgmental way could significantly enhance couples' functioning. Indeed, several survey studies have connected mindfulness to positive relationship satisfaction and adjustment (e.g., [Jones, Welton, Oliver, & Thoburn, 2011](#); [Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015](#); [Wachs & Cordova, 2007](#)). However, specific pathways connecting mindfulness to relationship satisfaction are not well understood.

One way to clarify how mindfulness contributes to relationship outcomes is by investigating specific facets of mindfulness. Mindfulness has been argued to have up to five major facets (i.e., describing, observing, acting with awareness, nonjudging, nonreactivity; [Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006](#)). However, a number of experts have come to consensus on mindfulness including two primary facets: attending to ongoing experience (i.e., awareness), and a nonjudgmental, accepting attitude towards these experiences ([Bishop et al., 2004](#); [Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008](#)).

These mindfulness facets have unique functions and relations to outcomes. For example, some measures of the awareness facet of mindfulness are unrelated to problem areas or even linked to increased

problems (e.g., observing subscale of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire [FFMQ]; [Baer et al., 2006](#)), while measures of the acceptance facet of mindfulness are fairly consistently related to positive outcomes (e.g. [Baer et al., 2006](#); [Cardaciotto et al., 2008](#)). To better understand how mindfulness contributes to relationship outcomes it is important to study the unique effects of these specific facets. However, there has been only one study examining specific mindfulness facets in relation to couples satisfaction, which found only some measures of awareness and acceptance of internal experiences (i.e., FFMQ observing, FFMQ nonjudgmental) were significant predictors ([Khaddouma et al., 2015](#)).

Not only might facets of mindfulness have unique functions, but we hypothesize that they may interact in important ways. Theoretically, both high levels of awareness and acceptance of one's experiences are necessary for mindfulness to be most beneficial (e.g. [Fletcher & Hayes, 2005](#)); being non-accepting and highly aware could lead to oversensitivity, excessive criticism of one's partner, and higher use of maladaptive coping strategies like avoidance, while being accepting yet unaware could lead to missing opportunities for effective action.

Consistent with this theory, research has found significant interaction effects between mindful awareness and acceptance in predicting other problem behaviors. One study found that mindful acceptance (FFMQ nonreactivity) and mindful awareness (FFMQ observing) each moderated the relationship between the other facet and substance use. The results were such that observing was negatively correlated with alcohol use when nonreactivity was high, but positively correlated with alcohol use when nonreactivity was low ([Eisenlohr-Moul, Walsh, Charnigo, Lynam, & Baer, 2012](#)). These findings support the hypothesis that being highly aware and taking an accepting stance towards experience is beneficial, while being highly aware and reacting immediately to

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change difficult internal experiences may be detrimental. Interactions between mindful awareness and acceptance also predict several other problem areas such as borderline personality disorder symptoms (Peters, Eisenlohr-Moul, Upton, & Baer, 2013) and depression and anxiety (Desrosiers, Vine, Curtiss, & Klemanski, 2014), supporting the hypothesis that awareness and acceptance are interdependent in their effects. However, studies have not investigated the possibility that facets of mindfulness interact to predict relationship outcomes.

The current study examined the relation between the awareness and acceptance facets of mindfulness in predicting couples satisfaction. We hypothesized that higher mindful awareness and higher acceptance of experiences would both contribute to greater couples satisfaction. We further hypothesized that acceptance and awareness would interact in predicting couples satisfaction, such that the effects of awareness and acceptance are greater when both are high. Past studies have primarily focused on how acceptance moderates the relationship of awareness to outcomes (e.g. Eisenlohr-Moul et al., 2012). However, we examined both acceptance and awareness as moderators when decomposing the interaction effect given that each facet may theoretically affect the function of the other (e.g. Fletcher & Hayes, 2005).

The results of this study may help inform mindfulness-based interventions for intimate relationships by clarifying which facets of mindfulness are most important in achieving couples' outcomes and whether or not the effects of one facet depend on the other. If our hypotheses are supported, it would suggest that mindfulness-based interventions for couples can achieve the best results by increasing both mindful awareness and acceptance.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

This study used a sample of undergraduate college students, 18 years of age or older who participated in an online survey to receive course credit. The study included a sub-sample of 139 participants who reported being in a relationship (63.8% dating, 36.2% married) from a larger survey study examining predictors of mental health among students (total  $n = 339$ ). Median relationship length was 1 year ( $M = 2.4$  years,  $SD = 4.2$ ). The sample of 139 participants was 60.9% female, ranging from 18 to 53 years old with a median age of 21 ( $M = 22.59$  years,  $SD = 5.61$ ). The sample was largely homogeneous in race (88.4% White, 2.9% American Indian/Alaska Native, 5.1% Asian, 0.7% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.7% Black, 3.6% Other) and ethnicity (only 6.6% Hispanic/Latino). Participants reported a mean score on the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007) of 17.19 ( $SD = 3.64$ ), similar to previous samples (e.g. Funk & Rogge, 2007). One participant was removed from the dataset for random responding based on a screening question (final  $n = 138$ ).

Participants were recruited through the online Sona platform for undergraduate research participation. Participants completed the survey online after providing informed consent. The survey included a number of other self-report measures assessing outcomes and predictors of mental health problems. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale (PHLMS)

The PHLMS (Cardaciotto et al., 2008) is 20-item measure of trait mindfulness with two subscales assessing mindful awareness and acceptance of internal experiences. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Higher total scores indicate higher levels of awareness and acceptance. The PHLMS has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Cardaciotto et al., 2008). Internal consistency for the present sample was  $\alpha = 0.83$  for awareness and  $\alpha = 0.86$  for acceptance.

#### 2.2.2. Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI)

The 4-item version of the CSI (Funk & Rogge, 2007) measured general relationship satisfaction. Items were rated on a 6-point scale, from 0 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true), except for the first item, which is rated from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect). Higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction. The 4-item version of the CSI has been found to be reliable and valid (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Internal consistency for the present sample was  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

### 2.3. Data analysis plan

Hierarchical linear regression tested for the main effects of each mindfulness facet as well as their hypothesized interaction effect. In the first step, awareness and acceptance were entered as predictors. The interaction term for awareness and acceptance was entered in the second step. The MODPROBE method was used to decompose the interaction (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). This approach calculates the effect of the moderating variable on the dependent variable at different levels (low, one SD below the mean; at the mean; and high, one SD above the mean) of the predictor variable. Analyses decomposing the interaction were run two ways; once with acceptance as the moderator and once with awareness as the moderator. Due to the low rate of missing data (2.2%), listwise deletion was employed for the regression analysis leaving a final sample of  $n = 135$ .

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analysis

Couples satisfaction was negatively skewed and leptokurtic, but had acceptable normality when using a squared transformation (skewness =  $-0.71$  and kurtosis =  $-0.28$ ). This sample had a mean score of 36.96 for awareness ( $SD = 6.40$ ) and 28.53 for acceptance ( $SD = 7.51$ ). Zero-order correlations indicated that acceptance and awareness were unexpectedly negatively associated ( $r = -0.20$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), such that higher acceptance related to lower awareness. This differs from past research finding these subscales are not significantly associated (Cardaciotto et al., 2008), although the correlation was small.

### 3.2. Hierarchical regression analysis

The first step of the hierarchical regression analysis examined the main effects of acceptance and awareness on couples satisfaction. This model was significant ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ,  $F = 6.90$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), with higher acceptance predicting higher couples satisfaction ( $b = 4.03$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). However, awareness did not significantly predict couples satisfaction ( $b = -1.19$ ,  $p = 0.42$ ). The second step tested for an interaction effect between acceptance and awareness in predicting couples satisfaction. Again, the overall model was significant ( $R^2 = 0.12$ ,  $F = 6.00$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and a marginally significant interaction effect was found for acceptance and awareness ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) in predicting couples satisfaction.

MODPROBE was used to decompose this interaction and identify the effects of the moderator variable at multiple levels of the independent variable: low (1 SD below the mean), at the mean, and high (1 SD above the mean). Both awareness and acceptance were tested as the moderator in accordance with the study hypotheses.

When examining acceptance as the moderator (Fig. 1), higher levels of awareness actually predicted lower couples satisfaction, but only when acceptance was low ( $b = -4.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Awareness did not predict satisfaction when acceptance was at the mean ( $b = -1.65$ ,  $p = 0.27$ ) or high ( $b = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.60$ ). Due to the small sample these analyses are based on a limited number of participants ( $n = 21$  below  $-1SD$ ,  $n = 52$  between  $-1SD$  and the mean,  $n = 35$  between the mean and  $+1SD$ , and  $n = 27$  above  $+1SD$  on acceptance).

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