



# Self-interest may not be entirely in the interest of the self: Association between selflessness, dispositional mindfulness and psychological well-being☆



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## ABSTRACT

The association between mindfulness and selflessness is firmly grounded in classical Indo-Sino-Tibetan contemplative traditions, but has received limited empirical attention from Western researchers. In Buddhism, the relationship between mindfulness and the self is of central concern to the cultivation of well-being. Mindfulness is believed to encourage insight into the truly insubstantial nature of the self, an understanding that is thought to encourage well-being. The present study explores these relationships, attending to dispositional mindfulness, the self as it exists on a continuum from self-centered to selfless, and psychological well-being. Results indicate a positive relationship between selflessness, dispositional mindfulness, and psychological well-being. It appears that construing the self as interdependent and interconnected with a broader social, natural, and cosmic context is linked with greater psychological well-being and dispositional mindfulness. Path analyses revealed that selflessness mediated the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and psychological well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Many domains of psychological research are concerned with self-transcendence, or the desire to move beyond one's current self-configuration (Wayment & Bauer, 2008). The realization of more adaptive self-configurations is believed to be a cornerstone of well-being (Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn, 2016; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011; Hadash, Plonsker, Vago, & Bernstein, 2016). Yet, the relationship between the self and well-being remains insufficiently specified. Mindfulness, from an early Buddhist perspective, is believed to be intimately linked with more adaptive self-configurations and well-being (Gyamtsso, 1994; Macy, 1991). Specifically, mindfulness is thought to release individuals from the suffering associated with behaving as if the self were "single, permanent and independent" (Gyamtsso, 1988, p.19). In other words, recognizing the deep interdependence of all things, or *selflessness*, is believed to encourage well-being. This study will explore associations between selflessness, well-being and dispositional mindfulness. To this end, selflessness will be introduced first and then

situated in relation to well-being. Then, mindfulness will be connected to both selflessness and well-being.

### 1.1. Selflessness

Modern conceptualizations generally parcel the self into a minimal self, or "a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15) and a narrative self, or "a more or less coherent self (or self-image) that is constituted with a past and a future in the various stories that we and others tell about ourselves" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15), with some theorists proposing a nested structure in which the minimal self gives rise to the narrative self through emergent neural processes (Damasio, 2010). The present study will uphold these definitions, but confine itself exclusively to examination of the narrative self. While the narrative self is believed to be one of the most universal human experiences (Wayment & Bauer, 2008), considerable variation in intra- as well as interpersonal self-configurations exists. Dambrun and Ricard (2011) propose three interrelated markers of variance in interpersonal self-configurations: the degree to which the self is treated as an entity that is 1) real (i.e., reified), 2) solid (i.e., entified), and 3) independent. At one pole of this self-configuration continuum, the self is experienced as sharply defined, solid and independent. At the opposing pole, the self is experienced as lacking reification and entification, fundamentally interconnected and arising from a dynamic, interactive network (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011) – a self enmeshed with all things. Dambrun and Ricard (2011)

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suggest that individuals who tend towards the former can be classified as “self-centered”, and those inclined towards the latter can be labeled “selfless”.

Self-centeredness and selflessness are reflected in individual estimations of social, environmental and cosmic interconnection (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). Two distinct lines of research have been developed to examine the self in relation to others as well as the self in relation to all things. With respect to social interconnection, Markus and Kitayama (1991) observed variation in degrees of social affiliation, illuminating a divergence between self-construals that are independent (i.e., the self “as a unique and independent social agent”; Waymunt & Bauer, 2008, p.127) and those that are interdependent (i.e., the self is “connected to others, so that the self is defined, at least in part by important roles, group memberships, or relationships”; Cross et al., 2011, p.791). In concert with this distinction, Dambrun and Ricard (2011) assert that individuals tending towards independent self-configurations can be understood as self-centered whereas individuals tending towards interdependent self-configurations are more selfless—a distinction echoed by Waymunt and Bauer (2008). With respect to broader conceptualizations of interconnection, DeCicco and Stroink's (2007); Mara, DeCicco, and Stroink's (2010) metapersonal self construct may further reflect a selfless self-configuration. The metapersonal self is characterized by “a sense of one's identity that extends beyond the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or the cosmos” (DeCicco & Stroink, 2007, p.84). In alignment with the interpersonal self, construing the self as connected to all things can be interpreted as an additional indication of selflessness (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). Empirical evidence supports the conceptual pairing of the interdependent and metapersonal selves, with positive associations observed between these two constructs (DeCicco & Stroink, 2007; Hanley & Baker, in press; Mara et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Well-being

The two, orthogonally structured self-configurations – self-centeredness and selflessness – are believed to differentially correlate with psychological (i.e., eudaimonic) well-being (e.g., Dambrun et al., 2012). Psychological well-being is described as an enduring, values-focused form of well-being, frequently operationalized across six domains: 1) self-acceptance, 2) positive relationships with others, 3) personal growth, 4) purpose in life, 5) environmental mastery, and 6) autonomy (Ryff, 1989). In short, selflessness is thought to be more strongly linked psychological well-being than self-centeredness. Waymunt and Bauer (2008) suggest that self-centeredness results in unrelenting, exhaustive, and ultimately ineffectual efforts to distinguish the self as special and unique (and by implication, achieve hedonic pleasure as a result of this pursuit). Selfless individuals are thought to be propelled by more eudaimonic motives, exhibiting a tendency to maintain equanimity in the ebb and flow of transitory emotions (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011) and thereby remaining committed to overarching, personal values despite distractions or obstacles (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Preliminary evidence appears to support these claims. A positive relationship between the interdependent self-construal and psychological well-being has been observed (Hanley & Baker, in press). Similarly, the metapersonal self has been found to be positively associated with psychological well-being (Hanley & Baker, in press). In light of these findings, selflessness—operationalized through social, environmental and cosmic interconnectedness—appears to be theoretically and empirically linked with psychological well-being.

### 1.3. Mindfulness

Emerging empirical evidence also suggests an association between selflessness and mindfulness (Hanley & Baker, in press; Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008; Mara et al., 2010). Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present

moment, and non-judgmentally” (p.4). Dispositional mindfulness is the tendency to display an intentional, present moment attentional stance in daily life (Thompson & Waltz, 2007) and is frequently operationalized by the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). The FFMQ is a five-factor scale measuring two mindful meta awareness skills (observing and describing) along with three mindful self-regulatory skills (acting with awareness, non-reacting, and non-judging). Correlational evidence suggests that both the interpersonal self-construal (Hanley & Baker, in press) and the metapersonal self (Hanley & Baker, in press; Mara et al., 2010) are positively associated with dispositional mindfulness. Furthermore, dispositional mindfulness has been linked with adaptive self-referential beliefs, such as self-compassion (Waymunt & Bauer, 2008), as well as with greater self-concept clarity (Hanley & Garland, 2017) and self-concept flexibility (Hanley et al., 2015).

The proposed association between mindfulness and selflessness is rooted in classical Indo-Sino-Tibetan contemplative traditions, mindfulness was viewed as the vehicle by which one might cultivate the requisite attentional stability (shamatha) and insight (vipassana) necessary to realize the basic interdependence of the self. In Buddhism, the relationship between mindfulness and the self is of central concern to the cultivation of wellbeing (e.g., Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), as suffering is believed to stem from the desire for permanence and the self is conceived as insubstantial and impermanent (Gyamtso, 1988; Waldron, 2003). Maintaining beliefs about the permanence of the self and acting in the world as if the self were an enduring entity is believed to lead to suffering (Gyamtso, 1988; Macy, 1991; Waldron, 2003). Indeed, Waldron (2003) asserts that the self, from the Buddhist perspective, is “actually a complex construct generated by misunderstanding, forged by emotional attachments, and secured by endless egocentric activities” (p.3). Almaas' (2016) extends this line of thought, more definitively stating that “seeing oneself as an entity with independent existence, agency, and ownership is the primary obstacle to spiritual enlightenment and is the repository of human suffering, misery and ignorance” (p.15) Mindfulness combats these reifying and entifying tendencies by encouraging insight into the transitory nature of the self (MacKenzie, 2016; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012) – a view of the self as interdependent and impermanent that has parallels to modern systems theoretical models (Macy, 1991; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). It may be that individuals naturally disposed towards mindfulness inherently grasp the insubstantiality of the self, contributing to greater psychological well-being.

In spite of the plausibility of this thesis, little empirical work has specifically addressed associations between dispositional mindfulness, the self, and psychological well-being. The present study will attempt to explore these relationships, attending to Dambrun and Ricard's (2011) conceptualization of the self as it exists on a continuum from self-centered to selfless; we hypothesized that these poles would represent maladaptive psychological dispositions and greater psychological well-being, respectively. Two methods of statistical inquiry were used in this pursuit. First, confirmatory factor analysis was used to explore whether a latent, selflessness variable would emerge from the interdependent and metapersonal self measures. Second, path analysis was used to test whether the latent, selflessness variable would mediate the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and well-being.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited from a large Southeastern University's College of Education research subject pool. Of the 1175 students that began this study, 980 completed all measures, yielding a completion rate of 83%. The majority of participants identified as American (75%), and additional demographics are reported in Table 1. Approval from the University's institutional review board was received for this study.

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