



Mindfulness as an end-state: construction of a trait measure of mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness has been studied extensively in both basic and clinical settings; however, discussions still persist. The current research approached this issue by creating a new measure of trait mindfulness. The construct defined within is end-state mindfulness and is a tendency to see things as they are moment by moment without any judgment. The newly created scale was validated in three studies. End-state mindfulness was negatively correlated with rumination, suppression, neuroticism, and better-than-average effect, but was not correlated with both positive and negative trait-affectivity; it also moderated negative emotional reactions in the context of mortality salience. End-state mindfulness was differentiated from the past measure of mindfulness in many aspects.

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1. Introduction

A key feature of mindfulness is to let go of previous events and focus on the present moment. Researchers have been attempting to define mindfulness as a psychological construct; however, there are difficulties because of the nature of this concept. This paper provides a new perspective regarding mindfulness in the context of psychological research. To this end, the current research chose trait approach because the focus is on the content of mindfulness, rather than the function of meditation practices. Whereas, other books and papers provide good reviews on the different processes and mechanisms of meditation and mindfulness (e.g., Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Didonna, 2009), the current paper distinctively conceptualizes mindfulness as an end-state in meditation practices.

1.1. Trait approach of mindfulness and a process of meditation

There are many measures of trait mindfulness; however, several measures are more extensively discussed than others (see Baer, Walsh, & Lykins, 2009; Bergomi, Tschacher, & Kupper, 2012). The Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) is the most integrated measurement of the available measures, which includes five sub-scales: observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience. This approach may reflect the entire process or simply phases of meditation practices resulting in a multi-facet measurement. The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) is another

measure that is often used. This scale is based on the single factor of attention/awareness as defining the core feature of mindfulness. These two representative measures highlight main theme in the debate concerning the construct of mindfulness, although this distinction may be overly simplified. One position is to focus on attention and awareness as a core feature, as MAAS suggests, whereas the other position adds non-judgmental acceptance as a core feature, as FFMQ indicates and other researchers discuss (e.g., Bishop et al., 2004).

First, in looking at this issue we should consider the concept of mindfulness with regard to the process of meditation practices. In a simplified categorization, meditation practices can be grouped into two types: concentrative meditation (or Focused Attention meditation; FA) and mindful meditation (Open Monitoring meditation; OM, see Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008 for the distinction between FA and OM meditations). In FA meditation, practitioners are asked to sustain selective attention on a chosen object and monitor the quality of attention from moment to moment. In a typical FA meditation, practitioners maintain focus on breathing. In OM meditation, practitioners initially have some focused attention; however, as meditation advances, practitioners monitor all experiences without focusing on any specific object. OM meditation may be referred to as insight meditation, which stems from Vipassana meditation (see Grossman & Van Dam, 2011). In this type of meditation, practitioners are instructed to be open and non-judgmental about perceptual experiences.

One possibility with regard to meditation practices is that mindfulness may be a state or a trait that is cultivated by meditation. The origin of the term mindfulness can be traced to the Pāli *sati* (Sanskrit *smṛti*, Tibetan *dran pa*; see Dreyfus, 2011 for the detailed discussion); the connotation is of remembering and not *wobbling*, in addition to attention/awareness. Furthermore, in the modern usage of mindfulness other

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meanings are added, such as observing and describing to the original meaning of *sati* (i.e., remembering). This issue is especially relevant for trait mindfulness. It is important to consider what is cultivated by meditation practices as a dispositional trait because this is a sustained state after meditation practices.

An argument against a position stating that attention and awareness are at the core of mindfulness is based on evidence suggesting different stages of meditation. Chiesa, Serretti, and Jakobsen (2013) reviewed papers on emotion regulation strategies and mindfulness. They argued that short-term practitioners tend to use top-down regulation, whereas expert practitioners are likely using bottom-up regulation; which was confirmed by neuroimaging studies. This suggests that beginners consciously or intentionally inhibit emotional responses, whereas experts do not react to emotional events and simply allow mental events to come and go (Chiesa et al., 2013). This matches the process of OM meditation, which typically begins with FA meditation, because even experts need some type of a focal point at the initial stage. Though conscious effort may be required initially, it is important not to sustain conscious effort to achieve mindfulness in a further stage. This suggests that meditation instruction emphasizing attention may be an initial stage of meditation, or a technique to achieve a further mental state. Therefore, as an end-state of mindfulness, other features should be considered as a cultivated state by meditation practices.

1.2. Mindfulness in a Buddhist context

Many researchers and Buddhist scholars have commented on the concept of mindfulness with regard to discrepancies between the use of mindfulness in clinical and Buddhist contexts (Bodhi, 2011; Dreyfus, 2011; Dunne, 2011; Olendzki, 2011). Kabat-Zinn (2011) has reflected upon the history of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and has discussed his initial intention not to relate mindfulness to Buddhist traditions because he wished to situate mindfulness in a secular setting to make it accessible to wider populations. Considering that it is now widely accepted, it is reasonable to offer reflections on the concept of mindfulness within the context of the original meanings in the Buddhist tradition.

As others have discussed, the original concepts of mindfulness contained the previously mentioned components such as attention/awareness of present moment, non-judgmental acceptance, and remembering (e.g., Bodhi, 2011; Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011; Dreyfus, 2011; Olendzki, 2011). However, mindfulness may not be the only psychological state that is achieved by meditation. In some of the Buddhist traditions, four or five stages are referred to regarding the progress of psychological states that practitioners can attain (Gethin, 1992). Thus, one potential problem the literature on mindfulness faces is that by restraining the concept of mindfulness to attention/awareness and/or non-judgmental acceptance, it may serve to limit the potential of meditation practices and relevant psychological therapies. There is a growing array of findings describing the effects of meditation and relevant therapies, which range from reducing cognitive biases (e.g., stereotypes, sunk cost bias) to improving mental states (e.g., Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014; Lueke & Gibson, 2014; Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Shooler, 2013). Therefore, another question arises regarding what the essence of meditation practice is considering the variety of its effects.

To trace the essence of meditation, it is natural to consider its Buddhist traditions. Buddhism has a diverse history with traditions ranging from Theravada to Mahayana Buddhism (Kang & Whittingham, 2010). One of the three marks of existence in Buddhism is impermanence, which expresses a transitory mode of existence. This might have resulted in the diversity of Buddhist traditions as it eschews dogma. The central theme of Buddhist teachings suggests that clinging to something leads to suffering. For example, if a person loses something or someone important, continuous thought on the loss (i.e., rumination in psychological terminology) leads to more negative thinking. One of the solutions to reduce suffering is to disrupt the fixation. Meditation could

help this process. An end result of meditation may be to see things as they are moment by moment and to understand that all events are impermanent. Therefore, in the current conceptualization, mindfulness is defined as seeing things as they are moment by moment without any judgment. In this framework, attention/awareness, acceptance, an ability to describe, and non-reactivity may not be the core of mindfulness, but merely representative of important facets leading to end-state mindfulness. The transitory nature of existence is the key element and may be why meditation practices produce diverse arrays of effects including the reduction of biased viewpoints and ruminative thoughts.

1.3. End-State Mindfulness scale

The goal of this study is to broaden our understanding of mindfulness as a psychological construct. To this end, a trait measure of mindfulness was created to capture the essence of mindfulness. The measure is referred to as an End-State Mindfulness scale because it is the end-state achieved in the process or practice of meditation. Surprisingly, this simple definition has not been presented as a core aspect of mindfulness in previous measures of trait-mindfulness. It is often included as part of a definition, but other elements are added. Baer (2011) reviewed representative measures of mindfulness and listed some sample items (see Table 1 on p. 249 for sample items). Based on these items, it is obvious that competence-based elements were added in each measure (e.g., I am open to..., I am good at..., and I am able to...). These are deliberate statements; yet, end-state mindfulness should be distinguished from states of volitional attention/awareness and acceptance. It is likely that concentration and awareness are necessary initially to focus attention. However, this focus must also abide by the transitory nature that is central to the conceptualization of end-state mindfulness.

The contrast of end-state mindfulness to prior measures of mindfulness corresponds to the distinction between top-down and bottom-up emotion regulations. This distinction also parallels meditation processes. At the beginning, practitioners deliberately focus on a focal object, such as breathing. At this stage, we may regulate our attention in a top-down manner. Prior measures of mindfulness designated this stage of mindfulness as either attention/awareness and/or describing physical states. At latter stages, experienced practitioners may not use deliberate, top-down cognition to focus attention, as regulatory processes convert to bottom-up processing, thereby establishing a processing amenable to experiencing the transitory nature of life events. This end-state is not permanent, as we do revert back to reacting and judging events in the routines of our daily lives. However, some can sustain this transitory mode of perceptual processing longer than others, or can return to this mode more frequently. Therefore, it is assumed that there are some individual differences to this trait.

Another key issue is the focus on the neutrality of mindfulness. Past measures of mindfulness were positively correlated with positively connoted constructs such as positive affect, competence, openness to experience, and self-actualization, and were negatively correlated with negatively signified constructs such as negative affect, negative psychological and physical symptoms, and dissociation (Baer et al., 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Some of the correlations make sense conceptually, but one should be cautious while interpreting the measures. For example, some FFMQ items (Baer et al., 2006) are affirmative, "I am good at...", and others are negative, "I criticize..." or "I disapprove..."; therefore, in the current scale construction, the intention was to avoid presenting items depicting desirable or undesirable characteristics in an effort to keep the construct as neutral as possible. It is recognized that having compassion or curiosity is an important component in some meditation practices; however, this conceptualization focuses on the definition: to see things as they are moment by moment without any judgment. In three studies, a new scale was constructed and its validity tested. The concept of mindfulness and the utility of the new measure are discussed in the conclusions.

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