



# Clarity of mind: Structural equation modeling of associations between dispositional mindfulness, self-concept clarity and psychological well-being



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## ABSTRACT

Clear self-concept beliefs are thought to be fundamental for well-being; and, mindfulness is believed to be intimately linked with beliefs about the self and well-being. Self-concept clarity suggests greater self-knowledge, which in turn may encourage more consistent involvement with fulfilling pursuits and relationships. Results from this study of 1089 undergraduate students indicate that self-concept clarity mediates the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and psychological well-being, with the mindful tendencies to act with awareness and remain non-judgmental identified as most closely linked with self-concept clarity and psychological well-being. Thus, dispositional mindfulness may encourage greater clarity with respect to beliefs about the self, which in turn may be associated with greater psychological well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Mindfulness is believed to encourage greater well-being (e.g., Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Indeed, the relationship between mindfulness and well-being is quite robust, with dispositional mindfulness (DM) consistently linked to psychological well-being (PWB; e.g., Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012; Hanley, Warner, & Garland, 2014). Given the expanding empirical support for the relationship between DM and PWB, a number of mediating mechanisms have been proposed (e.g., Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006); and, as both DM and well-being are broad constructs, it is likely that an assortment of mediating factors exist between the two constructs. Thus, continued expansion of the nomological networks surrounding DM and PWB is of considerable value for theoretical clarity and clinical purposes. This is particularly true with respect to how beliefs about the self relate to both DM and PWB.

Mindfulness is believed to be intimately linked with the self and self-concept, with mindfulness practice thought to encourage insight into the true nature of the self (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Indeed, cultivating awareness of the self is central to many mindfulness practices (Nhat Hanh, 1999). Given the observed relationship between mindfulness practice and experiences of the self (e.g., Berkovich-Ohana, Glicksohn, & Goldstein, 2012, 2014; Farb et al., 2007), it may be expected that individuals naturally disposed to mindfulness would also evidence characteristic patterns of belief about the self. Mindfulness, as a dispositional tendency, is believed to be normally distributed across

individuals (Brown & Ryan, 2003); yet, little attention has been paid to the potential relationship between DM and the self. As a majority of individuals do not engage in a regular mindfulness practice, expanding understanding of the relationship between DM and the self would appear a valuable extension of the empirical work already addressing the cognitive state of mindfulness and the self (e.g., Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2012, 2014; Farb et al., 2007).

Just as mindfulness is believed to be associated with the self and self-concept, self-concept beliefs are thought to be fundamental for PWB (Campbell et al., 1996). Specifically, self-concept clarity suggests greater self-knowledge, which in turn may encourage more consistent involvement with fulfilling pursuits and relationships (Deci, Ryan, Schultz, & Niemiec, 2015). Conversely, a disorganized self-concept would be expected to undermine PWB as a disorganized self would be incapable of providing a clearly structured internal valuation system (Hirsh, Mar & Peterson, 2012). Such disorganization is believed to lead to behavioral uncertainty, which has been neurophysiologically linked with emotional distress (Hirsh et al., 2012). However, despite these rather intuitive, and historically grounded theoretical assumptions, little empirical work has addressed the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and self-concept beliefs or the role self-concept beliefs may play in mediating the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and psychological well-being.

### 1.1. The self, self-concept and self-concept clarity

The self is a complex and contentious construct, despite a sense of self being one of the most basic human experiences (Klein, 2012). While commonly experienced as a unified whole, theoretical and experimental work challenge this view (Neisser, 1988) Consistent with early

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Buddhist philosophy, some cognitive science theories contend that there is no such thing as a self (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1992). Full exploration of this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but a growing number of theorists endorse the self as a dynamic system (Marks-Tarlow, 1999) emerging from patterns of relationship (Berkovich-Ohana, & Glicksohn, 2014) between fundamental aspects of the self (James, 1890).

Since William James (1890) the self has been commonly subdivided into a “minimal self” and a “narrative self” (Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn, 2014). The minimal self has been defined as “a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time” (Gallagher, 2000). In contrast, the narrative self “involves personal identity and continuity across time as well as conceptual thought” (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2014). Self-concept is intimately linked with the narrative self. Expressly, self-concept is defined as “a cognitive schema that organizes abstract and concrete memories about the self and controls the processing of self-relevant information” (Campbell, 1990, p.539). Markus and Wurf (1987) contend that self-concept is one of the most critical components in affective and behavioral regulation. Self-concept, as a dispositional tendency, is also believed to exist at varying levels of clarity across individuals (Campbell et al., 1996).

Self-concept clarity (SCC) is “the extent to which the content of an individual's self-concept is clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996). In short, SCC refers to the clarity with which the self is known. Several studies support the link between SCC and PWB (Diehl & Hay, 2011), finding SCC to be associated with more positive relationships (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011), greater purpose in life (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001), increased autonomy (Diehl & Hay, 2011), and greater self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1996). Despite evidence supporting the benefits of SCC, how SCC is developed and the characterological qualities encouraging greater SCC are largely unknown. Fundamentally, knowledge of self would appear to require self-awareness. Dispositional mindfulness, with its demonstrated connection to self-awareness (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), may be one such quality serving to develop or sharpen SCC.

## 1.2. Dispositional mindfulness

The construct of mindfulness has been defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). While mindfulness has been simultaneously conceptualized as a state, disposition, practice and intervention (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), dispositional mindfulness will be the focus of this study. Individuals vary to the extent to which they exhibit mindful qualities in their everyday lives; such DM is commonly operationalized by: 1) the tendency to observe internal and external experiences, 2) describe and differentiate emotional experiences, 3) act with awareness, 4) be nonreactive to distressing thoughts and feelings, and 5) take a nonevaluative stance towards one's inner experience (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). These five qualities are operationalized via domains of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006), a survey instrument designed to measure DM. Examination of the FFMQ at the facet level appears to suggest that these five facets could be arranged to reflect two broad self-referential domains identified by Vago and Silbersweig (2012): 1) self-awareness facets (observing and describing) and 2) self-regulation facets (acting with awareness, non-reacting, and non-judging). DM as measured by the FFMQ has been associated with domains of self-related processing, such as self-compassion (Baer et al., 2012), self-acceptance (Hanley et al., 2014), and self-control (Bowlin & Baer, 2012). Greater DM has also been associated with more flexible, less biased beliefs about the self (Hanley et al., 2015). As such, preliminary evidence suggests an association between DM and self-concept beliefs, extending parallel work suggesting a relationship between the cognitive state of

mindfulness and experiences of the self (e.g., Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2012; Farb et al., 2007).

The original Buddhist soteriological aim of mindfulness was to realize the insubstantiality of the minimal self (Nhat Hanh, 1999), a claim that is supported by preliminary empirical evidence among adept mindfulness practitioners (Dor-Ziderman, Berkovich-Ohana, Glicksohn, & Goldstein, 2013). By virtue of its effects on enhancing perceptual clarity while reducing bias related to distorted self-schemas, mindfulness may increase awareness of the narrative self (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). While much of the work relating mindfulness to the self has emphasized shifting experiences of the self as a result of mindfulness practice (e.g., Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2012; Farb et al., 2007), it is also likely that being disposed towards mindfulness would also be related to characteristic experiences of the self. Evidence suggests that mindfulness practice disengages self-referential processing networks (e.g., Farb et al., 2007), potentially relaxing habitual patterns of belief about the self during the course of practice. Similarly, it may be that more dispositionally mindful individuals are prone to relax habitual beliefs about the self in general, increasing the clarity with which the nature of the self is perceived. Thus, individuals naturally disposed to mindfulness would be expected to evidence greater familiarity with and knowledge about the self. As such, DM would be expected to support SCC. Moreover, the tendency to attend to present moment experience is likely to facilitate a clearer representation of the self across time, which in turn has been linked to well-being (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996; Diehl & Hay, 2011). Taken together, it may be that dispositionally mindful individuals would demonstrate greater SCC given the emerging empirical evidence of a relationship between mindfulness practice and experiences of the self along with the emerging evidence of a relationship between DM and the self. Such empirical evidence supports long standing theoretical proposals concerning the relationship between mindfulness and the self. Thus, more mindful individuals would be expected to act in more personally consistent and fulfilling ways, likely resulting in greater well-being.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and self-concept clarity given the scarcity of empirical work attending to this relationship despite established theoretical links. The relationships between dispositional mindfulness, self-concept clarity and psychological well-being were investigated at two levels of specificity given the multifaceted nature of DM. We hypothesized that: a) DM would be positively associated with SCC; and b) the association between DM and PWB would be statistically mediated by SCC.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were 1089 university students recruited from a large university's College of Education (COE) subject pool located in the Southeastern United States. Subject pool participants are expected to earn 2 h of research credit each semester by participating in research activities. Alternative, equivalent activities are provided if students choose not to participate in research. The three measures investigated in this study were included in a larger research project addressing the relationship between mindfulness and beliefs about the self. Participants completing the current study earned 0.5 credit hours. Recruitment of participants was conducted online and all surveys were administered online. The mean completion time was 27 min, with a completion rate of 89%.

The majority of participants were female (75%). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 53, with an average age of 21 ( $SD = 2.92$ ). The ethnic breakdown of this sample was as follows: 68% Caucasian, 16% Latino, 10% African American, 2% Asian or South Asian, 2% Multiracial, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1% non-classified.

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