



Effects of an 8-week meditation program on the implicit and explicit attitudes toward religious/spiritual self-representations

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ABSTRACT

Explicit self-representations often conflict with implicit and intuitive self-representations, with such discrepancies being seen as a source of psychological tension. Most of previous research on the psychological effects of mindfulness-meditation has assessed people's self-attitudes at an explicit level, leaving unknown whether mindfulness-meditation promotes changes on implicit self-representations. Here, we assessed the changes in implicit and explicit self-related religious/spiritual (RS) representations in healthy participants following an 8-week mindfulness-oriented meditation (MOM) program. Before and after meditation, participants were administered implicit (implicit association test) and explicit (self-reported questionnaires) RS measures. Relative to control condition, MOM led to increases of implicit RS in individuals with low pre-existing implicit RS and to more widespread increases in explicit RS. On the assumption that MOM practice may enhance the clarity of one's transcendental thoughts and feelings, we argued that MOM allows people to transform their intuitive feelings of implicit RS as well as their explicit RS attitudes.

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1. Introduction

People have two sources of self-evaluative tendencies. The first roots in high order propositional processes of deliberative reasoning in which well-articulated beliefs, motivations, and goals shape individuals' explicit attitudes. The second source relies instead on largely automatic and associative processes in which intuitive, "gut" evaluations and feelings, which people may or may not be aware of, shape individuals' implicit attitudes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Jordan, Whitfield, & Zeigler-Hill, 2007). For example, when we have to make decisions in our daily life, for instance choosing whether to accept or not a new job, we are frequently faced with situations in which we experience a psychological conflict between rational, reflective evaluations and other more intuitive feelings. Of importance, these conflicts do not only occur during appreciation of the external situations, but also affect more personal spheres, concerning self-representations and self-attitudes (Emmons & King, 1988; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Indeed, the multicomponent representation of

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the self includes both explicit aspects that are available to our conscious thinking and, eventually, to verbal description, and more implicit aspects that are barely available to us (Morin, 2006).

Methodologically, while explicit attitudes are measured directly with self-report questionnaires and scales, implicit attitudes are inferred indirectly from people's performance on reaction times measures such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwanz, 1998), the Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005), the sequential priming task (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995), or the name–letter task (Nuttin, 1985), which are more difficult to control or to fake and do not require self-reflection or the intent to self-evaluate on the part of the respondent.

A large body of research has shown that explicit and implicit measures of self-attitudes are frequently unrelated or weakly correlated to each other, with implicit measures explaining some variability in attitudes that self-report, explicit measures do not, for instance in fields such as religious/spiritual behavior and feelings in which self-report measures are particularly susceptible to desirable responding and other confounding factors (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Jordan et al., 2007; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Koole, Govorun, Cheng, & Gallucci, 2009; Krizan & Suls, 2008; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Thedford, & Tsang, 2010; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

More importantly, incongruities between explicit and implicit self-representations have been associated to different forms of psychological suffering (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Briñol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Koole et al., 2009; Schröder-Abé, Rudolph, & Schütz, 2007; Schröder-Abé, Rudolph, Wiesner, & Schütz, 2007; Zeigler-Hill & Terry, 2007), and this justifies the large effort that has been made in order to understand which could be the factors able to moderate the concordance between explicit and implicit attitudes, hence contributing to a more coherent self-image. For instance, it has been shown that when people rely more on intuitive feelings towards the self and less on conscious self-reflection, the congruence between explicit and implicit self-attitudes is encouraged. In different experiments, this was obtained by engaging people in self-evaluation under time-pressure or under heightened cognitive load (Koole et al., 2001), or yet by asking participants to complete implicit measures using “gut feelings” vs. reflective thought (Jordan et al., 2007; Pelham et al., 2005). Moreover, the correspondence between implicit and explicit self-measures is the higher the more the implicit attitudes are perceived as valid and accepted (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Jordan et al., 2007).

A potentially useful construct for the study of individuals' self-attitudes is mindfulness. Mindfulness is an attribute of consciousness that consists of being aware of and attentive to what is occurring in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness skills, which are developed effectively through the practice of meditation (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), have been shown to promote a variety of well-being outcomes, for instance in anxiety, depression, immune function, chronic pain, stress and substance-abuse problems (Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). An important quality of mindful awareness is the promotion of non-judgmental awareness of the self in which activated self-feelings, thoughts, and sensations are not attempted to be changed by the perceiver but are instead observed and accepted. Mindfulness awareness, and its cultivation through meditation, would operate through erosion of habitual patterns of responding and of the use of evaluative language and thinking; this would promote self-insights and a greater acceptance of one's internal states including intuitive feelings, potentially leading to transformation of implicit self-attitudes and perhaps to better tuning of one's implicit and explicit self-representations (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008; Koole et al., 2009; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Despite it being likely that implicit cognition and intuition are important aspects of mindfulness, it should be noted that most of the previous studies on the impact of mindfulness meditation on psychological health have only considered explicit self-report measures. While this may have exaggerated the ease with which people were seen to change their attitudes in these previous studies (Chambers et al., 2008; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000), the sole investigation of explicit cognition has also precluded the possibility of taking into account the effects of mindfulness on implicit cognition, both in isolation and together with explicit cognition. In fact, only a few studies exist on dispositional or state mindfulness (independently from continued meditation practice) and implicit and explicit measures of the self (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008; Koole et al., 2009; Levesque & Brown, 2007; Sauer et al., 2011; Strick, van Noorden, Ritskes, de Ruiter, & Dijksterhuis, 2012); some of these studies also took explicitly into account whether mindfulness promotes congruency between explicit and implicit self-measures (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Koole et al., 2009). Although very valuable, these previous studies have, however, left unaddressed the issue of whether regular meditation practice during a mindfulness training period of a few months can have a direct impact on implicit as well as explicit measures of the self.

The present study was aimed at examining this issue by trying to directly put into relation the effects of an 8-week mindfulness-oriented meditation training (MOM) on implicit and explicit religious/spiritual self-representations. Explicit and implicit attitudes toward religiousness/spirituality (RS) were investigated in two groups of healthy, meditation naïve, participants; the first group was involved in a MOM training, while the other group was not involved in any meditation practice and formed the control group. Explicit and implicit RS were investigated in the present study for a variety of reasons. First, recent empirical evidence has suggested a close link between mindfulness and spirituality, in that participation in a mindfulness meditation training, although occurring within a secular context, may be associated with increases in explicit measures of spirituality and, more generally, with increased daily spiritual experiences (Carmody, Reed, Kristeller, & Merriam, 2008; Falb & Pargament, 2012; Geary & Rosenthal, 2011; Greeson et al., 2011; Wachholtz & Pargament, 2008). Second, in the light of evidence suggesting that spirituality may be a possible mechanism by which mindfulness training leads to beneficial outcomes such as improvements in medical and psychological symptoms (Carmody et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2011),

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