
Mindfulness and culture: An introduction

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In this special issue of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY on mindfulness and culture, we reflect on the historical and cultural contexts that inform mindfulness and meditation. Advocates and critics frequently represent mindfulness as a timeless and solitary practice that offers acultural access to health and mental equilibrium. However, mindfulness itself has a fascinating history, and as Cook (2021, forthcoming), Cassaniti (2018) and others (see Braun 2013; McMahan 2008) have shown, the meaning, nature and effects of mindfulness practice have changed radically over the last 150 years, in an ongoing dialogue between Buddhist and scientific interests.

The anthropologists in this issue provide rich, qualitative accounts of mindfulness' historical and cultural complexities. They locate mindfulness in broader political, social and intersubjective worlds. They explore practitioners' efforts to make sense of their meditative experiences and provide vivid descriptive accounts of how people experience, value and struggle with mindfulness practice. Each article shows that broader ontological and metaphysical ideas about what it is to be human and to engage with the world necessarily inform mindfulness practice.

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Julia Cassaniti's cross-cultural comparison of *sati* and mindfulness in the Buddhist-majority countries of Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka reveals that a valorization of memory meets present-centredness as a way of overcoming forgetfulness. Here, practitioners bring the mind to bear on present circumstances to cultivate a moralized mastery over the mind. Cassaniti emphasizes how mental energies extend into the interpersonal realm.

Kitty Wheeler's work on Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) in the UK, a therapeutic intervention for preventing depressive relapse, shows that 'paying attention to the present moment' implies multiple temporalities. Practitioners variously temporalize mindfulness as instant, incremental and latent as they navigate their changing experiences of mental health and depressive relapse.

Michal Pagis and Orly Tal argue that mindfulness practitioners share experiences of collective solitude and embodied synchronization in group meditation. Their long-term ethnographic research with Israeli practitioners shows that, far from being an individual or solitary practice, group spaces are created and reinforced by the co-presence of others as bodies become synchronized in stillness and breathing.

The role of shared social space in meditative experience is explored further in Nalika Gajaweera's ethnography of non-white Western practitioners' experiences of race, racism and whiteness in Southern California and the Bay Area. Like Pagis and Tal, Gajaweera argues that the practitioner's social environment informs mindfulness practice. She questions the assumption that the 'inner self' is necessarily a place of safety for self-cultivation and that mindfulness practice spaces are necessarily safe spaces for all. Here, mindfulness engages meaningfully with the history of racialized suffering in the US.

Francis McKay argues that meditation practices are ethically transformative, but he asks whether tradition is necessary for virtue ethical thinking. McKay's ethnography of an American non-profit organization established to research and support 'meditators-in-distress' focuses on practitioners who experience distressing phenomena in their meditation, including phenomenological changes, disturbing emotions and transformations in experiences of self, time and space. He shows that practitioners navigate their experiences in the ongoing work of culturally embedded sense-making in 'post-traditional' contexts. Like Wheeler, McKay examines how practitioners respond to their mental health experiences. However, he shows that the meditators he works with sometimes go through periods of prolonged conceptual uncertainty, caught between multiple frameworks of understanding.

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Taken together, this special issue of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY illustrates that anthropological approaches enable us to explore the lived experience of culturally embedded assumptions about the mind and mental health. Moreover, in doing so, we might interrogate the universalizing and acultural assumptions found in both advocacy and critique.

Each article provides an ethnographically grounded enquiry into mindfulness in a different context. Mindfulness is a social practice imbued with a rich and complex temporality. Bound with ongoing efforts to live well, this rests on an intersubjective space of political, bodily and mental influences. The studies offered here demonstrate that away from the back and forth of advocacy and critique, the epistemology of mindfulness training is met and responded to in the context of broader phenomenal experiences and social meanings. They do so by providing compelling qualitative accounts of practitioners' efforts to navigate the cultures of mindfulness in which they find themselves. ●

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