

Mindfulness and culture

Guest Editorial by Joanna Cook &
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Mindful parenting, mindful banking, mindful sex: it seems like there are few activities out there these days that cannot be done mindfully. Mindfulness is probably in your workplace, undoubtedly in your university and very likely in your children's school. TV and radio shows attract mindful pundits and enthusiasts as unlikely as Ohio congressmen and Lancashire comedians (comedian Lee Mack's podcast is pleasingly titled 'I can't believe it's not Buddha'). Everything from completing your tax return to the time sink online game Candy Crush are marketed as 'mindful'.

Mindfulness developed from a Buddhist awareness-training practice (Pali *sati*), found in the canonical *suttas*, and adopted by lay practitioners in the mass-meditation movement that began in Burma in the early 20th century and quickly spread across Buddhist countries. However, the development of mindfulness-based healthcare initiatives launched mindfulness as a household technique for addressing the daily stresses of workday lives.

In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to support chronic pain. In the 1990s, John Teasdale, Mark Williams and Zindel Segal created Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to address the problem of recurrent depression in those most vulnerable to relapse. Many of today's mindfulness techniques involve '[paying] attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally' (Kabat-Zinn 1994: 4). Through daily practice, mindfulness practitioners change the focus and quality of their attention, developing non-judgemental awareness of present experience. In so doing, they hope to lead healthier and happier lives.

Media interest in mindfulness draws on an extensive research base that points to the positive effects of mindfulness. Researchers examine the effects of mindfulness on everything from the length of telomeres to racial bias to irritability and much more. The evidence suggests that mindfulness offers significant support for mental health and well-being.

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Nevertheless, as soon as mindfulness became the focus of a research and media boom, it earned an impressive backlash. Detractors argue that contrary to these positive research findings, mindfulness serves a capitalist agenda, rendering practitioners into docile neo-liberal agents and adjusting the workforce to the inequitable conditions of modernity. What you might see as a valuable practice of self-cultivation embedded in an ethical and metaphysical tradition is, these critics argue, a neo-utilitarian tool that makes individuals solely responsible for their suffering.

As one might imagine, mindfulness researchers themselves are far more circumspect about the potential of mindfulness than media representations of their work would suggest. However, this jostling by advocates and critics characterizes much of the media bun fight on the subject. Mindfulness is either the secret to a happier life or perpetuates oppression and inequality. Seemingly, focusing on your breath for 20 minutes a day is a high-stakes game.

With its focus on culture and context, what might anthropology contribute to debates around our broader understanding of mindfulness and mental health? Without reducing practitioner experiences to symptoms of determining forces (neo-liberalism, for example), might we account for their efforts through the social worlds and structural forces in which they are ensconced?

We cannot divorce mindfulness practitioner intentions – the alleviation of the suffering of mental ill-health, for example – from their understanding of who they are and why practice matters to them. Moreover, these metaphysical parameters inform the epistemology of practice itself. The intention to and effects of practice (be they gaining enlightenment or reducing anxiety) cannot be divorced from existential questions surrounding what it is to suffer, what it is to be human and how practice effects change. Thus, mindfulness, which we might think of as a solitary activity, has significant social dimensions that are collectively shared and taught. Who you think you are and what you think you are doing when you practise mindfulness will profoundly affect what happens.

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An example of how anthropology can reach beyond the headlines is the problematic media treatment of a recent study by Michael Poulin, an associate professor in psychology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Poulin et al. (2021) hit the headlines with the sensational news that 'Mindfulness can make you selfish!' Given the emphasis on compassion and ethical behaviour baked into the traditions from which mindfulness draws, and the positive effects on individual well-being found by most research on mindfulness, this is a juicy research finding.

The BBC and other news outlets made much of the shocking discovery that mindfulness may exacerbate selfishness in people who tend to think of themselves more than others. With the rampant increase of attention to mindfulness – from *Time Magazine's* cover story on 'the mindful revolution' in 2014 to the explosion of apps like Headspace and Calm during the Covid pandemic – this apparent side effect of practice may point to a severe social problem.

However, while press coverage represents Poulin's study as another damning critique of the mindfulness movement, its findings are far more anthropologically interesting than the attention-grabbing headline suggests. Poulin and his colleagues set out to investigate whether the effects of mindfulness might depend on its cultural context and the existing values of the people who practise it.

Examining the social effects of mindfulness practice among students at a US university, they found that some mindfulness participants were statistically *more* likely to engage in prosocial activity. At the same time, some were statistically *less* likely to do so.

Poulin and colleagues staged a typically tricky psychology experiment. They asked participants to undergo a short, standard mindfulness exercise. They then asked if they would be willing to help with a purportedly unrelated task afterwards that involved stuffing envelopes for a charity drive. Willingness to help with the charity drive – and the number of envelopes stuffed – was coded as prosocial behaviour.

They tied the difference in whether mindfulness helped or hindered sociality to participants' self-construal. They designated those who referred to themselves using relational and collective self-descriptions as having 'interdependent' self-construal compared to the more 'independent' self-construal of those who engaged in self-referentiality. It may seem self-evident that those with more independent (or 'selfish') self-construals may be less likely to want to help others than those with more interdependent conceptions of the self. Surprisingly, those with relatively independent self-construals were *even less*

likely to engage in the prosocial envelope-stuffing activity when they completed mindfulness training than had they performed no mindfulness training in the control group. They were also less likely to do so when compared with their more interdependent counterparts.

More than just ‘good’ or ‘bad’ effects, Poulin et al.’s study suggests that paying attention to the mind using techniques like mindfulness may enhance tendencies that already exist in our personalities and predilections. It shows how mindfulness works in culturally patterned and individual, personal ways.

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Framing mindfulness as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ without closely studying sociocultural context is meaningless. Anthropologists have examined how patterned cultural differences inform paying attention to the mind. Recent anthropological work has examined the relationship between categories of mental experience and cultural context, examining the relationship between psychological categories and culturally embedded ethical practice. We find such a sensibility to the ontological and metaphysical complexity of psychological experience in the anthropology of mindfulness.

For example, Cassaniti’s research on mindfulness in Theravāda Buddhist countries shows that mindfulness is characterized by attention to memory. One *remembers* to bring the mind to the present by using past experiences to inform one’s interpretation of current events. This is quite different from a solely present-focused emphasis that many representations of mindfulness suggest. Moreover, it is not just in the temporal relations between thought and experience that the meanings of mindfulness in these countries look different from those in other regions of the world. Assumptions about the nature of time, the structure of emotion, the workings of power, the patterning of ethical conduct and even the very idea of what a person is, all underlie mindfulness’ expression.

These assumptions vary across cultural contexts, though not in a state of bounded or static isolation. An emphasis on memory may be becoming less relevant to the experience of mindfulness training, even in some – but not all – settings in Theravāda contexts. Drawing mainly from secular meditation movements in Burma that have become re-instantiated for a particular Western moment and shrouded in the guise of universal biomedical expertise, some versions of mindfulness have come to dominate much of the global discourse about it. As Cassaniti’s work demonstrates, however, mindfulness may not be a single, universal object for popular scrutiny after all.

Cook conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork on mindfulness in the UK, researching NHS mindfulness courses, therapist training programmes, parliamentarians’ mindfulness practice in Westminster and political advocacy for mindfulness in public policy. She shows that the popularity of mindfulness results from broader transformations in ideas about the self, mental health and human flourishing. People across society increasingly think of mental health as ‘something we all have’ that we can actively support through cultivating a kindly relationship with our minds: that we can effect positive change on ourselves, our habits, impulses and reactions by learning to relate differently to our minds.

In the UK, learning to relate to the mind through dedicated practice is informed by rationalism and romanticism. For practitioners, mindfulness is both an instrumentalized, ameliorative intervention and an ethical practice; it is a pragmatic support for mental health and a ‘way of being’ that infuses everyday life. The rationalism of evidence-based psychological services for the prevention and treatment of illness, and the romanticism of the potential of self-work for living more fully, coalesce in the expanded category of mental health as a transversal issue and in the popularity of mindfulness as an evidence-based ethical practice.

What is missed in the polarization of widespread debate about mindfulness is this kind of contextual detail that can give us insight into how people engage with mindfulness and what meaning that experience might have for them.

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Anthropology has promise in moving beyond sensationalist modes of interpreting. Long-term anthropological research bears out Poulin’s hunch that cultural values profoundly influence the effects of mindfulness. This is different from saying that mindfulness does different things for different people, and it shows how mindfulness embeds within broader projects of ethics and the construction of subjectivity. It suggests that we can attend to what mindfulness does for different people due to its tendency to bring out extant qualities that constitute ourselves as ethical subjects. Mapping these qualities may be the next task for psychologists, anthropologists, health advocates and policymakers interested in what mindfulness is and can be. ●

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