

Mindfulness Practices and Emotional Development in Adult Life: A Developmental Framework for Research and Teaching

Metta Karuna McGarvey, 2010
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Conclusion: Implications and Integrated Insights

If we want to enhance the possibilities for more compassion and peace in the world—and in ourselves—we need to look beneath our usual and, perhaps, instinctive emotional responses... Through mindfulness, our hearts become spacious enough to hold the painful emotions, to feel the suffering of them, and to let them go. But it takes practice—and perhaps several different practices—to open to the difficult emotions that we’re aware of and to illuminate those that are hidden.

Joseph Goldstein, *Three Means to Peace*

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the many explorations in this thesis, and the divergent interests of potential readers, this conclusion also begins with a map. Section I presents what one would expect to find in the conclusion of an academic dissertation: A detailed discussion of implications for future research and teaching. Section II is addressed to those readers with a broader interest in human development, and enhancing their own mindfulness practices and emotional development. [Note: Only the first section is included in this excerpt].

I. Implications for Future Research and Teaching

A. Research on Mindfulness and Emotional Characteristics

Perhaps the most important consideration brought to light by this study is that potential changes associated with mindfulness practices can be highly variable, and outcomes associated with specific types of practices may follow different developmental trajectories. A majority of the variation even in the strongest associations was not explained by mindfulness as assessed in the study, suggesting that individual differences in traits, practice types, or both may explain a great deal of important variability in emotional traits and their development.

The strong and significant associations between mindfulness and emotion-related traits from the personality and emotional intelligence assessments support continued use of these instruments for longitudinal study. However, the small effect size of many of the significant associations suggest that not all of the factors need be assessed in future studies. The large effect size of the association between Mindfulness and the Neuroticism factor supports continuing to use the Five Factor Model of personality to assess negative traits, and the moderate effect size of the association with total Emotional Intelligence (EQ) supports continuing to use Bar-On’s model of Emotional Intelligence to assess positive traits. In addition, a future study that included the other main model of Emotional Intelligence (MSCEIT, Brackett & Salovey, 2004) would enable

comparison of whether one of these models is better than the other for exploring the potential effects of mindfulness on the development of enduring emotional traits.

A second implication is that it is important to study the developmental trajectories for enhancing positive emotions versus diminishing negative emotions. Might these develop in importantly different ways? Might one develop sooner/faster than the other? These data suggest overall that a decrease in negative emotions might occur at a faster rate than an increase in positive emotions as mindfulness increases, but it would be important to explore whether one develops before the other; whether making an effort to increase positive emotions and decrease negative ones simultaneously might produce better results; and whether any such effects might be differentially associated with some kinds of mindfulness practices in comparison to others.

Finally, thinking about why only some of the facet level traits within a factor or subscale score were significantly associated with mindfulness raises intriguing questions. For example, the Stress Tolerance facet of the Stress Management subscale of the EQ-i was significantly associated with Mindfulness, but the Impulse Control facet of Stress Management was not. This suggests that changes in subjective experience (ability to tolerate) might occur before changes in behaviors (ability to inhibit). A future study using a 360 degree version of the assessment instruments could test whether mindfulness practitioners are more accurate in their self-assessments (compared to others' assessments of their behavior) than a matched control group of non-practitioners. This is not to say that subjective changes are unimportant. Buddhist mindfulness practices were developed to eliminate suffering, an inherently a subjective experience, and studies have consistently shown that mindfulness practices are associated with enhanced wellness by many measures. However, the ultimate outcome of interest for this study is behavior change. Therefore it will be important in the future to explore whether there are particular conditions or factors that inhibit or support the co-occurrence of subjectively perceived changes and objectively observable behavior changes.

B. Research on Mindfulness and Type of Practice

The intriguing association between mindfulness and Integral practice in the study group supports the importance of conducting future studies comparing different kinds of mindfulness practices. Designing studies that enroll large numbers of individuals representing a wide range of mindfulness practices will be important for documenting whether emotional characteristics (e.g., lower Neuroticism or higher Emotional Intelligence) may be differentially associated with type of practice. However, the simple inclusion of larger numbers of practitioners or a wider range of practices is unlikely in itself to significantly advance our understanding. This study highlighted the importance of more clearly defining and categorizing four things: 1) what practitioners actually do when they practice (versus their identification with a particular tradition or technique); 2) their practice experience (how much they practice currently, and total lifetime experience), 3) their degree of proficiency (how well they are able to generate and maintain a state of mindful attention, absorption, and/or awareness), and 4) their level of attainment in the developmental trajectory for their particular practice(s).

Whenever possible, objective measures such as changes in respiration and heart rate as a measure of calm (mindful absorption), or performance on a task such as a stroop test (for

mindful attention or awareness), would be valuable to include. Studies designed to document associations between objective biological or performance measures and subjective self-report assessment instruments such as the FFMQ are also needed. If strong associations can be established, larger studies (where such biological measures are impractical) could be undertaken with confidence that the assessment instruments used to measure mindfulness are reasonably robust. Also, since mindfulness as a skill operates in a range of mental states, more than one assessment instrument may be needed to quantify, for example, proficiency with respect to the state of mindful awareness separate from proficiency with generating and maintaining the state of mindful attention.

One other implication of the significant association between Integral practice and Mindfulness in this study is that it could be important to explore the effect of physical exercise, separately and in combination with mindfulness practices. Commitment to physical exercise distinguishes Integral practice, and relaxing techniques (yoga, Tai-Chi) were not significantly associated with higher mindfulness scores. Anecdotally, it is interesting that of seven participants selected for follow-up study¹ (Chapter 7), four are Integral practitioners, and one of the three who is not an Integral practitioner is a marathon runner. It might also be that the discipline necessary for regular hard physical exercise is itself important and carries over to consistency of mindfulness practice.

C. Educational Implications

Another important finding of this study is that different types of meditation practice may catalyze different kinds of developmental change, some of which can be understood as informational (content or healing) change and some as transformational (structural) change. Mindfulness as a state of awareness may have the unique potential to catalyze transformational change, meaning that *vipassanā* or similar types of insight meditation may uniquely catalyze transformational change processes. If individual differences do result in important variability in the progression toward more wholesome mental habits and transformational insight, teachers need to be attentive to potential risks and vulnerabilities associated with such differences. Recent research and media reports have presented mindfulness and meditation as if they catalyze unmitigated positive results. It appears likely that some periods can bring greater vulnerability than others. For example, when clarity of self-observation precedes the development of equanimity, judging oneself inappropriately harshly could be destabilizing and maladaptive. Adapting insight meditation practices to help adults develop emotional skills and capacities in normal life requires further research before we could be confident of their transformational potential, and be confident about the best practices for taking individual variations into account when teaching insight practices.

Meanwhile, the results of this study reinforce the wisdom of Jon Kabat-Zinn's emphasis on helping people become aware of and gentle with the tendency to judge themselves harshly as they begin to see their unskillful behaviors more clearly. However, it is also important for teachers to clarify that the ability to be non-judging (an aspect of equanimity) takes time and effort to develop, and is an outcome of practicing mindful awareness. In the same vein, it is

¹ The criteria for selection was that they be in the top 15 highest scorers on Mindfulness, and either the top 15 lowest scorers on Neuroticism, or the top 15 highest scorers on total Emotional Intelligence (EQ).

important to clarify that the concept of “acceptance” means being clear about what is real in the helpful sense of the Laurance Gonzales quote “To see reality you must first recognize it as such” not in the sense that whatever is present is "okay." The honest recognition of reality is the precondition for discerning an appropriate course of action. It is equally important to see what is real clearly, and to accurately discern when a reaction or response might be skillful or unskillful. Seeing what’s true, and wise discernment of what to do about it, if anything, is the essence of insight practice. It may mean working to enhance your tolerance, or knowing when to walk away, or when to limit your efforts to try to change a situation. These may take considerable time and effort to develop, even with the support of teachers or coaches.

With respect specifically to leadership development, the findings of this study reinforce the sensibility of teaching stress management techniques via *shamatha* (calming) meditation techniques and relaxing body practices prior to introducing insight practices. Most Buddhist traditions do this in order to stabilize the mind, but it has the added benefit of feeling good and enhancing wellness, which is motivating. In addition, since stress reduction is associated with all types of mindfulness practice, it is likely to be a benefit that can be developed relatively quickly and easily, an important consideration for busy leaders. Although this empirical pilot study represents a modest start, I hope that the findings from this study will help all those interested in the potential of these techniques to enhance psychological wellness, and to facilitate learning to work with emotional reactions more skillfully, in the service of greater wisdom and cooperation.