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Testing mindfulness with perceptual and cognitive factors: External vs. internal encoding, and the cognitive failures questionnaire

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Abstract

A new approach to testing mindfulness in relation to perceptual and cognitive factors is presented. In two studies a total of 142 participants were tested using a measure of mindfulness and a measure of thoroughness in perceptual processing (“external encoding”). Mindfulness was shown to be correlated with external encoding (study 1) and both mindfulness and external encoding predicted low “cognitive failures” (study 2). Results are discussed in terms of their implications for possible mechanisms responsible for the benefits of mindfulness in psychological well-being.

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1. Introduction

Mindfulness, being attentively present to what is happening in the here and now, is a psychological construct with a long history that has recently begun receiving wide interest in different

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areas in psychology. The primary area of interest has been in applied clinical psychology (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2000; Linehan, 1993; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), but interest has rapidly begun to emerge in social and personality psychology and other areas of research (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Walach et al., 2006). A number of scales to measure mindfulness have now been tested (e.g., Baer et al., 2004; Bodner & Langer, 2001; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Measures of mindfulness have been shown to positively correlate with a variety of characteristics related to psychological well-being (e.g., positive affect and vitality, Brown & Ryan, 2003; emotional intelligence, Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) and negatively correlate with characteristics related to lack of well-being (e.g., depression, neuroticism, and anxiety, Brown & Ryan; alexithymia and experiential avoidance, Baer et al., 2006). Here possible reasons for these correlations will be discussed and support will be presented for one possible explanation that has not previously been considered in relation to mindfulness. As will be seen, some of the increase in well-being related to mindfulness may be due to a relatively more thorough attention to the external environment that Lewicki (2005) calls “external encoding”.

One issue among mindfulness researchers is the relative internal vs. external focus of mindfulness. Some theorist suggest that mindfulness is constituted by a single factor, *present awareness*, which is balanced between internal and external awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003, 2004). Other theorists (e.g., Baer et al., 2004, 2006; Bishop et al., 2004) suggest an additional, internally focused factor, *acceptance*. In this second factor the well-being benefits of mindfulness are ascribed to *accepting* “thoughts and emotions as they arise, without judging (or) evaluating” them (Baer, 2003, p. 128). These benefits are thus clearly claimed as accruing to mindfulness as “attention to primarily *internal* stimuli” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 235). If the well-being benefits of mindfulness could be shown as likely due to attention to *external* stimuli, then, this would lend support to Brown and Ryan’s *present awareness* factor. The current research is intended to show that at least some of the well-being benefits of mindfulness may accrue not because of greater attention to internal stimuli but rather because of relatively greater attention to external stimuli.

It is not hard to suggest why this assertion may be true. In commenting on the negative correlation they found between mindfulness and neuroticism, Brown and Ryan (2003) state that “the inverse relation between them is, in fact, meaningful. That is, neuroticism, including worry, (public) self-consciousness, and other features can preclude mindfulness; conversely the inculcation of awareness of self and others...may lead to a reduction in neurotic tendencies” (2003, p. 832). Both worry and the kind of public self-consciousness Brown and Ryan are referring to (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975, self-consciousness scale) involve mainly internally-directed attention. Other things being equal, paying relatively more attention to external events would lessen the amount of this kind of internally-directed attention and, thus, lessen neuroticism. Consistent with this, a wide variety of research has supported the connection between self-focused attention and negative affect in general (Mor & Winquist, 2002; Watson & Pennebaker, 1989). What remains is to test whether mindful people do indeed pay relatively more attention to the external environment than the average person does. This is done in study 1, using a measure of *external encoding* developed by Lewicki (2005).

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