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## Review

# Mindfulness, Big Five personality, and affect: A meta-analysis

Tamara L. Giluk\*

Department of Management and Organizations, University of Iowa, Henry B. Tippie College of Business, Iowa City, IA 52242, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is purposefully and nonjudgmentally paying attention to the present moment. The primary purpose of this study is to provide a more precise empirical estimate of the relationship between mindfulness and the Big Five personality traits as well as trait affect. Current research results present inconsistent or highly variable estimates of these relationships. Meta-analysis was used to synthesize findings from 32 samples in 29 studies. Results indicate that, although all of the traits display appreciable relationships with mindfulness, the strongest relationships are found with neuroticism, negative affect, and conscientiousness. Conscientiousness, in particular, is often ignored by mindfulness researchers; results here indicate it deserves stronger consideration. Although the results provide a clearer picture of how mindfulness relates to these traits, they also highlight the need to ensure an appropriate conceptualization and measurement of mindfulness.

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## 1. Introduction

Mindfulness is a quality of consciousness, more specifically defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness consists of a purposeful attention to and awareness of the present moment, approached with an attitude of openness, acceptance, and nonjudgment (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Research on mindfulness has increased dramatically (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007) and appears to be warranted. Mindfulness has been shown to have positive effects on mental health and psychological well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety), physical health (e.g., chronic pain), and quality of intimate relationships (Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Mindfulness can also reduce stress and burnout in the workplace (e.g., Mackenzie, Poulin, & Seidman-Carlson, 2006) and may have broader effects such as more external awareness at work, more positive relationships at work, and increased adaptability (Hunter & McCormick, 2008).

Measurement of the mindfulness construct has begun only in the last decade. To examine validity of a construct, researchers attempt to discern its nomological net; that is, to make clear what something is, often by relating the theoretical construct to other constructs (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Thus, scholars have examined mindfulness in relation to established and well-understood dispositional constructs such as the Big Five personality traits and trait positive and negative affect. However, it is difficult to

draw conclusions regarding the relationship of mindfulness to personality and trait affect because research results have been inconsistent. For example, research has shown extraversion to be both positively (e.g., Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004) and negatively (e.g., Thompson & Waltz, 2007; Waters, 2007) related to mindfulness. Neuroticism has consistently been shown to relate negatively to mindfulness, however, correlations have ranged from as low as  $-.28$  (Bartlett & Plaut, 2009; O’Loughlin & Zuckerman, 2008) to as high as  $-.58$  (Kostanski, 2007) with estimates spanning this entire range; thus, it is difficult to precisely estimate the magnitude of the relationship. Results for the remaining Big Five personality traits and for trait affect show similar variability.

Meta-analysis (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004) is an analytical tool to synthesize results across studies. By cumulating results across individual studies, meta-analysis corrects for the biasing effects of sampling error. Meta-analytic methods can also address the biasing effects of other statistical artifacts such as measurement error. Thus, meta-analysis often can resolve the issue of such seemingly inconsistent results. It provides the most precise and accurate estimate possible given the available data regarding a particular relationship.

Therefore, in this paper I seek to contribute to the developing understanding of the mindfulness construct by calculating a more precise and accurate estimate of the observed and construct-level relationships between mindfulness and the Big Five personality traits as well as trait affect. I begin by discussing mindfulness, the Big Five, and trait affect. I then present meta-analytic results of the relationship of mindfulness to personality and trait affect. I conclude with a discussion of the findings as well as implications for the mindfulness construct and future research.

\* Tel.: +1 319 335 1504; fax: +1 319 335 1956.

E-mail address: [tamara-giluk@uiowa.edu](mailto:tamara-giluk@uiowa.edu)

## 2. What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment on purpose and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This view of mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) and is characterized as an Eastern perspective on mindfulness (Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Mindfulness entails self-regulation of attention to concentrate on the present (Bishop et al., 2004). Thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are considered to be objects which one should observe but not something on which one should elaborate (i.e., direct attention toward thinking *about* the thought, feeling, or sensation). Such elaboration would take one out of the present moment and require use of resources that could be devoted to present-moment awareness. In addition, elaboration often involves judgment (e.g., this is a “good” or “bad” experience because of how it is making me think or feel). Mindful awareness emphasizes impartiality so as to minimize habitual reactions and encourage thoughtful response (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Mindfulness also involves one's orientation to experience (Bishop et al., 2004). Mindfulness encourages approaching one's experiences with a “beginner's mind” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pp. 35–36), as if experiencing the event for the first time. With such an approach, one brings to their experience openness and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004). Acceptance in this sense refers to receptivity to seeing things as they actually are in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Each moment is viewed as unique, and if one brings to the moment preconceived ideas, one will not be able to experience the moment as it truly is. Non-attachment, or the attitude of letting go, is fundamental to this orientation. One learns to attend to and accept all experiences, which allows an individual to respond effectively rather than react habitually to the experience (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

This meta-analysis and the above discussion focus on the Eastern perspective on mindfulness. The Western perspective of mindfulness is rooted in an information-processing perspective (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) and is best exemplified by the work of Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer (e.g., 1989). Langer's conceptualization of mindfulness shares some commonalities with the Eastern perspective; however, there are conceptual differences (Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Langer's mindfulness focuses on the process of making novel distinctions and taking different perspectives as opposed to relying on categories created in the past or a single viewpoint (Langer, 1989). Langer (1989) cautions against making strict comparisons between her work within the Western scientific perspective and mindfulness derived from an Eastern tradition.

## 3. Relationships of mindfulness with personality and trait affect

The five-factor (Big Five) model of personality, which has become well-established in recent decades, consists of the traits neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Positive and negative affect are the two dominant dimensions that consistently emerge in studies of affect, the broad term encompassing emotions and moods. Research results indicate a strong dispositional component of affect, such that even transitory moods are a reflection of one's general affective level (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). I next briefly discuss how mindfulness is expected to relate to each of the Big Five personality traits as well as trait affect.

### 3.1. Neuroticism

Neurotic individuals tend to be anxious, self-conscious, moody, and insecure (Barrick et al., 2001). They are more susceptible to psychological distress and generally cope more poorly with stress

than others (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Thus, neuroticism has been negatively linked to subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Mindfulness, on the other hand, has been associated with enhanced self-regulated functioning, mental health, and psychological well-being (Brown et al., 2007). Through a process of voluntary exposure (i.e., “sitting with” one's experiences, even those which are unpleasant, rather than avoiding them), mindful individuals are thought to have a greater ability to tolerate a range of thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Baer, 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Therefore, mindfulness is expected to be negatively related to neuroticism.

### 3.2. Extraversion

Extraverts tend to be talkative, social, gregarious, and assertive (Barrick et al., 2001). Both extraversion (e.g., Diener et al., 1999) and mindfulness (Brown et al., 2007) have been linked to subjective well-being and positive emotionality, which would suggest that these constructs are positively related. However, extraversion is also characterized by a need for activity, excitement, and stimulation (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Such a need may make mindfulness of the present moment, particularly if the present moment is routine or slow-paced, difficult for extraverts. This difficulty suggests a potential negative relationship with mindfulness. Thus, the proposed relationship between mindfulness and extraversion is unclear. Previous research has found extraversion to be both positively (e.g., Baer et al., 2004) and negatively (e.g., Thompson & Waltz, 2007; Waters, 2007) related to mindfulness. Thus, no hypothesis is made regarding the relationship.

### 3.3. Openness to experience

Individuals who score highly on openness to experience tend to be curious, imaginative, broad-minded, and unconventional (Barrick et al., 2001). Openness to experience implies receptivity to experience, including one's own inner feelings and emotions. Open individuals are attentive to and curious about both their inner and outer worlds (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Mindfulness emphasizes attention to and awareness of one's experiences as well as an approach to these experiences that is curious, open, and accepting (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The common elements of attention, curiosity, and receptivity suggest that mindfulness should be positively related to openness to experience.

### 3.4. Agreeableness

Agreeable people are generally good-natured, cooperative, supportive, caring and concerned for others (Barrick et al., 2001). Mindfulness is also characterized by showing feelings of empathy and compassion toward others and toward one's relationships (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). In addition, agreeable individuals are generally trusting and believe that others are honest and well-intentioned (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This belief seems consistent with the mindful orientation of “beginner's mind” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pp. 35–36), in which people and events are approached as if experiencing them for the first time. Thus, mindful individuals are likely to approach a person with whom they have had negative interactions in the past (e.g., interactions that may lead to distrust) with an orientation of starting anew with a sense of trust in the individual's intentions. Thus, mindfulness is expected to positively relate to agreeableness.

### 3.5. Conscientiousness

Conscientious individuals are likely to be dependable, responsible, rule abiding, and achievement-oriented (Barrick et al., 2001). One hallmark of conscientiousness is self-discipline (Costa & Mc-

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