



Examining mindfulness and psychological inflexibility within the framework of Big Five personality

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ABSTRACT

Psychological inflexibility and mindfulness represent two constructs that have garnered a great deal of interest in recent years as central components in the conceptualization of many new cognitive and behavioral therapies. Nonetheless, though theoretically related, relatively little is known regarding associations between these two constructs and consensus models of trait personality such as the Big Five. The current study therefore aimed to more fully elucidate associations among these three domains within a relatively large, diverse undergraduate sample ($N = 429$). Mindfulness was negatively associated with Neuroticism and positively associated with Conscientiousness while psychological inflexibility was positively associated with Neuroticism and negatively associated with Conscientiousness. Further, while Conscientiousness evidenced the strongest contribution to mindfulness, Neuroticism evidenced the strongest contribution to psychological inflexibility. Better elucidating how psychological inflexibility and mindfulness differentially relate to Big Five personality traits expands the nomological network surrounding these constructs and begins to reveal common processes underlying psychopathology and health behaviors.

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1. Introduction

A number of new cognitive and behavioral therapies have emerged in recent years that include mindfulness (e.g., enhanced attention to present moment), and psychological inflexibility (e.g., maladaptive experiential avoidance combined with diminished global functioning) in their conceptual frameworks and attempt to promote greater wellbeing through targeting these processes (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006).¹ This movement is, in part, a response to empirically based models postulating psychological health to be affected by how people respond and relate to their internal and external experiences, more so than by the presence of these experiences themselves. The constructs of psychological inflexibility and mindfulness reflect how an individual responds to his or her own internal and external environment and they have been found to be strongly associated with various forms of psychopathology and behavioral health (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006).

Although psychological inflexibility and mindfulness are theorized to be related but distinct processes (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Masuda & Tully, 2012), a relative paucity of empirical evidence supports this conceptual position. In particular, it is surprising that although a large number of published studies have examined these constructs in relation to various outcomes of interest, only recently has the nomological net (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) of these two constructs begun to be examined. As such, investigations of relations between these two processes and more well-established and understood constructs (e.g., the Big Five model of personality) are relatively scarce. To date, the Big Five model of personality is the dominant conceptual personality framework accounting for a diverse range of psychopathology (Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010) and health-related (Goodwin & Friedman, 2006) outcomes. The present study aimed to more fully elucidate associations among these three domains within a relatively large, diverse undergraduate sample. Better elucidating how psychological inflexibility and mindfulness differentially relate to Big Five personality traits expands the nomological network surrounding these relatively newer constructs and may help to reveal common processes underlying psychopathology and health behaviors.

1.1. Psychological inflexibility

The concept of psychological inflexibility stems from a contemporary behavioral account of complex human behavior and

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¹ We acknowledge that mindfulness and psychological inflexibility may be considered trait-like but are also commonly viewed as behavioral processes subject to contextual factors. For the purposes of the current paper, we chose to take an agnostic position.

psychopathology (Hayes et al., 2006). It refers to “the rigid dominance of psychological reaction over chosen values and contingencies in guiding actions” (Bond et al., 2011, p. 678). More specifically, psychological inflexibility is marked by experiential avoidance (e.g., unwillingness to remain in contact with distressing thoughts, feelings, memories, and other private experiences) combined with diminished daily functioning. Accumulating evidence suggests that psychological inflexibility is associated with a wide range of psychopathology, including depression (Bond et al., 2011), anxiety (Masuda & Tully, 2012), and general psychological distress (Masuda, Price, & Latzman, 2012).

1.2. Mindfulness

Mindfulness, although defined differently across investigations (Baer et al., 2006), is most often conceptualized as a regulation process of enhanced attention to present moment experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are considered as events to be noticed rather than on which to be elaborated (e.g., acting on them, taking them literally). Mindfulness has been found to be positively related to psychological well-being (Brown et al., 2007) and inversely associated with a wide range of more problematic psychological outcomes, including depression (Roemer et al., 2009), anxiety (Roemer et al., 2009), and general distress (Masuda et al., 2012).

1.3. Big Five personality

The Big Five model of personality is the most widely used model of personality in the research literature (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Specifically, extensive factor analytic examinations have consistently revealed five robust broad personality dimensions across languages and cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997): Extraversion (e.g., energetic approach-oriented), Agreeableness (e.g., prosocial tendency towards others), Conscientiousness (e.g., impulse control abilities and attention to detail), Neuroticism (e.g., general tendency to experience negative emotions and distress), and Openness (e.g., open-mindedness, originality). A large body of literature confirms the importance of Big Five personality traits with respect to both psychological and physical health. For example, meta-analytic findings confirm the link between Conscientiousness and a variety of health-related behaviors including diet and exercise, substance use behaviors, violence, risky sexual behaviors, among others (Bogg & Roberts, 2004). Additionally, in addition to coping difficulties in general (David & Suls, 1999), Neuroticism has repeatedly been shown to be the core personality trait associated with a range of psychopathology, most notably anxiety and, along with low levels of Extraversion, depression (Clark & Watson, 1991; Mineka, Watson, & Clark, 1998). Additionally, low Agreeableness has been repeatedly found to be associated with aggression (e.g., Latzman, Vaidya, Watson, & Clark, 2011) and extreme variants of Openness have been shown to be associated with various forms of personality pathology (e.g., Widiger & Trull, 1992). Overall, given the exceedingly large extant literature concerning strong associations between Big Five personality and a wide range of psychological and physical health outcomes, these set of traits should be included in investigations of other constructs linked to health-related outcomes.

1.4. Relations among psychological inflexibility, mindfulness, and Big Five personality

Although several studies have demonstrated an inverse association between psychological inflexibility and mindfulness (Baer et al., 2006; Masuda & Tully, 2012), less is known concerning associations between these two constructs and Big Five personality

traits. In fact, with regard to psychological inflexibility, we could locate only three studies that report data on associations with Big Five personality (Bond, Lloyd, & Guenole, *in press*; Gloster, Klotsche, Chaker, Hummel, & Hoyer, 2011; Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011). Specifically, all three studies found the strongest association between psychological inflexibility and Neuroticism (*Mdn* $r = .68$). Further, Gloster et al. (2011) found psychological inflexibility to be negatively associated with Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness ($r_s = -.49, -.35,$ and $-.18$, respectively). No association was found with Agreeableness. Similarly, across two independent samples, Gámez et al. (2011) found psychological inflexibility negatively associated with Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness ($r_s = -.37, -.26,$ and $-.47$, respectively). Associations with Openness were less consistent. Taken together, results of these three extant studies clearly showed a large association between Neuroticism and psychological inflexibility, followed by negative associations with Conscientiousness, suggesting that psychological inflexibility strongly involves the tendency to experience greater levels of distress and negative emotions and difficulties with controlled and deliberate actions.

With respect to mindfulness, research examining relationships with Big Five personality traits has been equivocal. In an attempt to begin to address these inconsistent findings, however, Giluk (2009) conducted a meta-analysis investigating associations between mindfulness and Big Five personality traits. Mindfulness was found to be strongly negatively associated with Neuroticism and moderately correlated with Conscientiousness.

To date, however, researchers have yet to examine associations between mindfulness and psychological inflexibility and Big Five personality in concert. This is surprising given not only the strong theoretical (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) and empirical (Bond et al., *in press*; Giluk, 2009; Gloster et al., 2011) associations between these two relatively newer constructs and Big Five personality, but also the strong association between mindfulness and psychological inflexibility.

1.5. Current study

The current study aims to fill this void in the literature by examining both mindfulness and psychological inflexibility simultaneously within the context of Big Five personality. Such an investigation will contribute to the conceptualization of these two, relatively newer constructs as it represents an examination of the nomological net of these two constructs. In addition, the current investigation examines similarities and differences in associations between these constructs and the well-defined, widely-used Big Five model of personality. Investigating mindfulness and psychological inflexibility simultaneously is crucial as the conceptual and empirical associations between the two constructs still remain oblique; mindfulness has been viewed as a facet of psychological inflexibility (Hayes et al., 2006) or as a process related to, but distinct from, psychological inflexibility (Baer et al., 2006). By examining these constructs in concert, the current study may help to reveal common processes underlying psychopathology and health behaviors.

Although this is the first investigation to date of these processes in concert, we offer a number of tentative hypotheses based on the relevant extant literature. Given the strong (negative) correlation repeatedly found between mindfulness and psychological inflexibility, we expect associations between Big Five personality and these two processes to be largely similar, albeit in opposite directions. Consistent with previous findings (Giluk, 2009; Gloster et al., 2011), and following from well-established associations with psychological distress (Hayes et al., 2006) as well as the connection between the experience of negative emotions (i.e., Neuroticism) and the processing of negative emotions (i.e., mindfulness and

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