

Critical Reflections on Mindfulness-based Interventions

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Panel Presentation

International Transpersonal Conference, Prague 2017

“Inner Ecology: Collective and Transcultural Perspectives to Transpersonal Psychology”

I would like to take this opportunity to address what may be learned from a critical reflection on the collective and transcultural aspects of the rise of mindfulness-based interventions. [> Slide 2] I will argue that a discussion of these aspects is directly relevant also to related issues in transpersonal psychology, because both mindfulness and transpersonal psychology have a shared cultural origin – in the sense that both arise out of a confluence of Western and other cultures – as well as shared cultural context – since both navigate the social territory of late capitalism.

What’s up with mindfulness? Currently, there is a real tension in the mindfulness discourse between advocates of the mindfulness movement/revolution and advocates of the mindfulness backlash. My intention here is to draw our attention to some of the underlying social and cultural issues of this debate, which are directly relevant also to the past, present and future of transpersonal psychology. [> Slide 3]

In general, we have to acknowledge that when religious or spiritual practices are extracted from the social and historical contexts in which they have arisen, then the meaning, the function and the effect of these practices in their new cultural contexts are dramatically altered – and this is exactly what has happened with mindfulness. In the past decades, it has become separated from the ethics, philosophy and soteriology of Buddhism, and, based on a growing body of scientific evidence for its efficacy, it has spread in many forms from the medical and clinical establishment also into educational, corporate and other contemporary settings. (cf. TP, success, costs/downsides)

This spread has been facilitated by a perennialist view of mindfulness as a universal human agent that is independent of historical or cultural contexts. However, this view also puts mindfulness at risk of being employed as a technology to accommodate people to individualistic, consumerist and corporate values. Therefore, we need to reevaluate how our own cultural assumptions, our institutional structures and our economic systems have shaped this development. [> Slide 4]

Given this situation, it is no wonder that traditional religious concerns have also been part of the mindfulness backlash. However, while these are understandable and partially constructive, they are also largely defensive and reactionary, and they fail to take into account the pluralistic nature of Western society as well as the unavoidable transformation of Buddhism as it encounters modernity and mixes with dominant values of Western cultures. [> Slide 5]

So rather than to fall back into a traditionalist critique, it is necessary to have a fresh look at these recent developments from the perspective of historical, cultural and transcultural studies. What arises from this is the distinction of neoliberal and critical approaches to mindfulness, which highlights how neoliberal values and capitalist discourses have shaped mindfulness to become a technology of the self (cf. Foucault). In these discourses, stress, disengagement and discontent are represented as pathologized phenomena that relate to the level of the individual, which further allows for the framing of mindfulness as an instrumental and privatized practice.

This has the effect of depoliticising mindfulness by avoiding a critical engagement with the causes and conditions of social suffering that are implicated in the power structures and economical systems of capitalist society. [> Slide 6]

The related biomedical paradigm further reinforces the notion that disease as well as health and well-being are matters of autonomous individuals – an individualistic worldview which exaggerates internal pathology and understates environmental stressors. This focus on individual pathology further deflects attention away from culture and context.

In this view of mindfulness as a disciplinary apparatus, the mind and body become sites for self-disciplinary control, self-surveillance and self-optimization, which also serves to ensure that human beings are constituted as private and atomistic individuals that voluntarily participate in their own governance and come to forget the bonds of solidarity and collectivity. [> Slide 7]

This ideology of individual autonomy strongly resonates with neoliberal values and a view of mindfulness as a lifestyle choice that goes in hand with market imperatives for consumption, efficiency, productivity and social order. All this is the result of a universal, asocial and ahistorical view of mindfulness, which should be replaced by forms of mindfulness that are critical, socially aware and engaged. [> Slide 8]

Such novel forms of practicing and teaching mindfulness will allow for a critical pedagogy which challenges, interrogates and ultimately transforms our deeply rooted Western cultural values and assumptions. Otherwise, mindfulness and related practices run danger of – perhaps unintentionally – preserving the status quo and maintaining institutional structures that contribute to social suffering.

Such a critical pedagogy will, first of all, examine how mindfulness is shaped by our own cultural assumptions, institutional structures and economic systems, and, secondly, it will empower voices that provoke, question and challenge the status quo. Thirdly, on a collective level, social criticism may be aimed at exposing the hidden assumptions, the misconceptions and ideologies below the surface of modern mindfulness discourses – criticism that may finally lead to a reformation and reorientation of these practices to enhance the common good and open space to raise important ethical and political questions. [> Slide 9]

If we do not work towards these goals, mainstream accounts will continue leave out the real effects of social, political and economic factors as well as situational stressors caused by our major institutions themselves. If, one day, we will succeed at this challenge, then mindfulness may effectively realize its emancipatory potential of fostering civic or social mindfulness, in which those who teach and practice mindfulness turn critical attention not only inward but also outward to include those institutions, histories and socioeconomic as well as cultural influences that contribute to and are often the cause of social suffering. I sincerely hope that both mindfulness and transpersonal psychology are willing to face this challenge head-on.

References: Purser, Ronald E. et al. (eds.): *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement*. Springer: 2016.

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Inner Ecology: Collective and Transcultural Perspectives to Transpersonal Psychology

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Introduction

Mindfulness & Transpersonal Psychology:

Shared cultural origins

Shared cultural contexts

The Mindfulness Movement vs. The Mindfulness Backlash

The Mindfulness Movement

Separation from Buddhist ethics, philosophy and soteriology

Spread into medical, clinical, educational and corporate settings

The perennialist view

Mindfulness as a universal human agent independent of historical or cultural contexts

Risk: a technology to accommodate people to individualistic, consumerist and corporate values

The Mindfulness Backlash

Traditional concerns

To preserving authenticity, integrity and canonical authority
To address its adaptation to fit to consumer society

Limitations

Largely defensive and reactionary
Fail to take into account the pluralistic nature of Western society
Fail to address the inevitable transformations in encounters with
modernity and its dominant values

Neoliberal vs. Critical Mindfulness

Neoliberal values and capitalist discourses:

Mindfulness as „a technology of the self”

Stress as pathologized phenomenon at an individual level

An instrumental and privatized practices

→ Depoliticizing mindfulness

vs.

Critical engagement with the causes and conditions of social suffering
(the power structures and economical systems of capitalist society)

Neoliberal vs. Critical Mindfulness

The individualistic worldview

Focusses on individual pathology

Deflect attention away from culture and context

→ Disease and health as matters of autonomous individuals

The disciplinary apparatus

Self-disciplinary control, self-surveillance, self-optimization

Subjects as private and atomistic individuals

→ Bonds of solidarity and collectivity are forgotten

Neoliberal vs. Critical Mindfulness

Neoliberal values

Freedom, choice, authenticity, entrepreneurialism, competitiveness

Market imperatives

Consumption, efficiency, productivity, social order

Universal, asocial and ahistorical practices

vs.

Critical, socially aware and engaged practices

Mindfulness as Critical Pedagogy

Challenges, interrogates and transforms Western cultural values and assumptions

Examines influences of cultural assumptions, institutional structures and economic systems

Empowers voices that provoke, question, challenge status quo

Expose hidden assumptions, misconceptions and ideologies

→ Reformation and reorientation towards the common good

→ Raises ethical and political questions

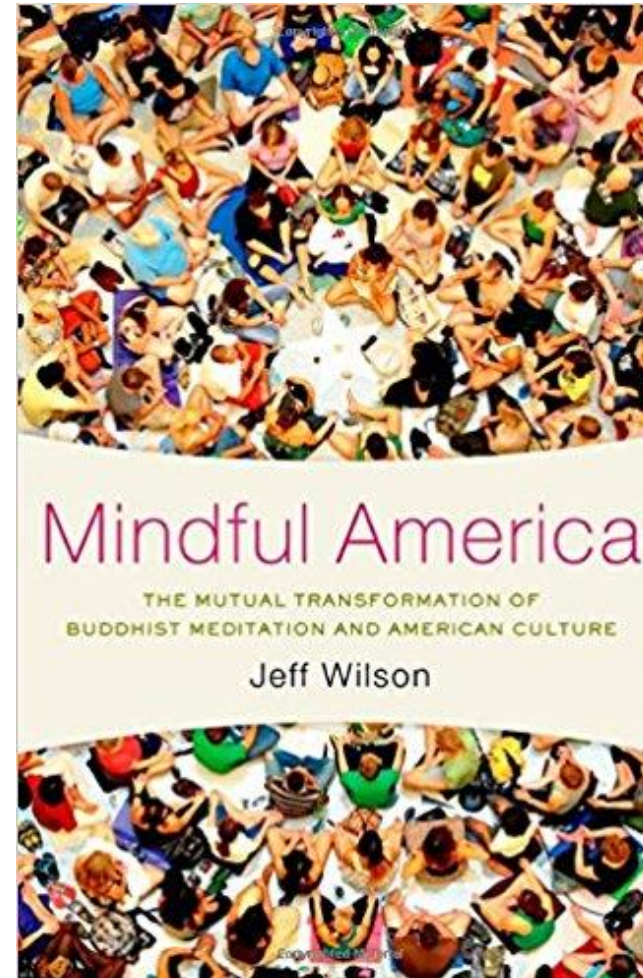
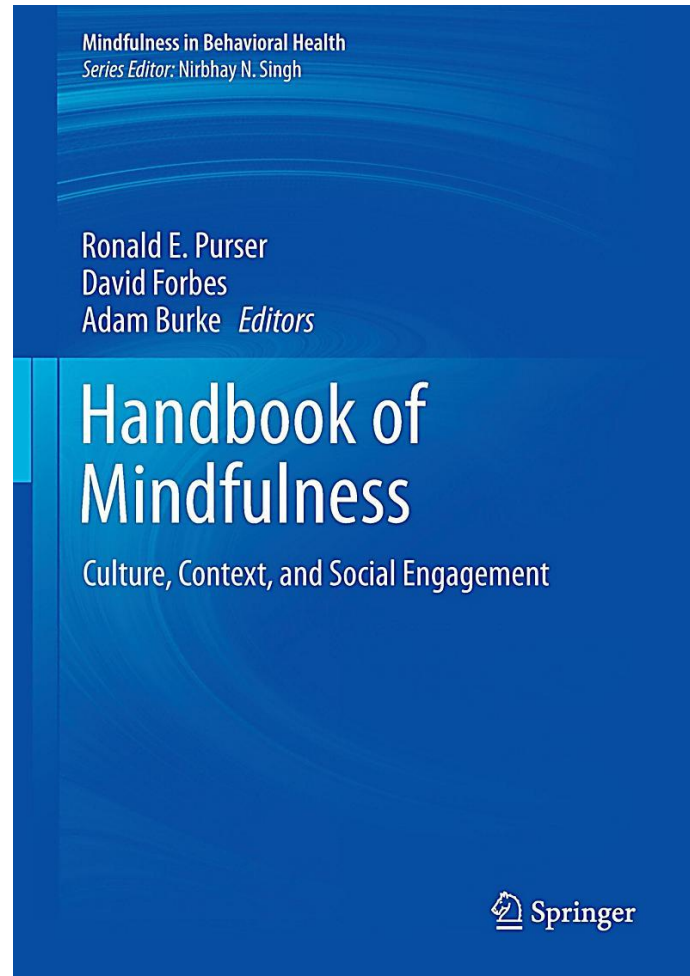
Mindfulness as Critical Pedagogy

Mainstream accounts disregard social, political and economic factors

The emancipatory potential of civic/social mindfulness:

Critical attention towards institutions, histories, socioeconomic and cultural influences that contribute to social suffering

References



Thanks for your attention!

Poster presentation: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion for Social Transformation
Saturday 18:00-19:30

Workshop: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion as Relational Practices
Sunday 11:00-12:30

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