MINDFULNESS: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Mindfulness meditation has become one of the most popular psychological techniques for those seeking improved happiness and wellbeing. Its use has developed beyond mental health settings and it is becoming a widespread practice in the wider public sphere. While mindfulness appears to have gained much acceptance within psychology, it has received relatively little critical attention. In this article, mindfulness is considered from a critical psychology perspective, by contextualising its popularity as a product of advanced capitalist society. Using a Foucauldian perspective, it is argued that mindfulness reinforces neoliberal ideology by promoting the concept of the responsible, autonomous, choosing individual who dedicates themselves to a lifelong project of self-improvement and self-discipline. It is hoped that this theoretical critique will encourage psychologists and psychotherapists to reflect upon the political implications of their activities when selecting mindfulness as a technique for improving happiness and wellbeing.

1.   Introduction

Mindfulness has gone mainstream. Not only has mindfulness meditation become a common feature of contemporary psychotherapeutic practice, it now occupies an increasingly popular position in the wider public sphere and is promoted in settings as diverse as education (Jennings & Siegel, 2015), criminal justice (Howells, Tennant, Day, & Elmer, 2010), occupational health (Flaxman, Bond, & Livhelm, 2013) and public policy (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015) as well as being a prominent focus of popular psychology and self-help literature (e.g., Puddicombe, 2011) as a means of achieving improved personal happiness and wellbeing; one might choose to refer to a 'mindfulness industry'. Unusually, mindfulness has achieved widespread acceptance and received relatively little critical attention. This article offers a critical perspective on the secular practice of mindfulness by considering it within the social context of advanced capitalism. Drawing on the work of Foucault, it is argued that mindfulness is

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commonly being used as a technique for the regulation of individual subjectivity in a manner that is in line with neoliberalism, one of the major ideologies supporting the capitalist system. As a result, mindfulness represents a form of psychological power/knowledge which obscures political and socioeconomic perspectives on the factors underlying unhappiness and distress in contemporary capitalist society.

2.   Mindfulness in Secular Therapeutic Practice

Mindfulness has its origins in Buddhist meditative practices and refers to the focusing of one's attention to immediate experience in a spirit of care and discernment (Shapiro and Carlson, 2009). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982) is widely regarded as the key figure promoting the use of mindfulness as a technique in secular therapeutic settings for managing difficulties such as chronic pain and stress. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' (p. 4). In his account of the role that mindfulness can have in people's lives, Kabat-Zinn promotes 'full catastrophe living', referring to 'the human spirit's ability to come to grips with what is most difficult in life and to find within it room to grow in strength and wisdom' (p. 5). One element of mindfulness discourse is a view of the world as consisting of 'an unending stream of human suffering and misery' (p. 6) and that only if we accept the reality of this suffering can we make an active and free choice in how we respond to it. Accordingly, mindfulness is presented as a learnable skill in which the individual can develop their capacity to direct their attention toward their constantly unfolding thoughts, emotions and sensory experiences and to maintain an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance toward them (Baer, 2003).

The application of mindfulness as a therapeutic technique reflects its position as a key characteristic of Buddhist psychology. Since the 1990s, these Buddhist associations have been acknowledged but gradually marginalised as mindfulness came to be promoted as a pragmatic technique, which was free of ideology; with its historical context obscured, a secularised version of mindfulness could provide a method of popularising Dharma practice in Western society without it necessarily being referred to as such (Bazzano, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2000). Hickey (2010) discusses Kabat-Zinn's rhetoric about mindfulness and Dharma by positioning him within a broader historical, cultural and religious context in which Buddhism has come to be discussed in terms of how meditation can improve physical and mental health rather than how it might encourage the deconstruction of self, promote Enlightenment or influence rebirth. In this context, mindfulness has been criticised as a form of diluted Buddhism and has been pejoratively referred to as 'McMindfulness' (Hyland, 2015; Brazier, 2013).

As mindfulness came to form a key component of what its proponents call a 'third wave' of cognitive-behavioural therapies (CBT) (Hayes, 2004), the Buddhist associations were further marginalised as secular psychotherapists took hold of the technique they had inherited from Buddhist practitioners such as Kabat-Zinn (1994). While the dominant 'cognitive turn' in psychology contributed to the popularity of behavioural interventions being replaced by a discourse in which people in mental distress were considered as exhibiting faulty or irrational thinking, third wave CBT involved a return to behaviourist principles with internal experiences being reframed as 'events' to which the person in distress is considered to be responding unhelpfully. This narrative provided a shift in the cognitive behavioural therapist's theory of

change, whereby practices aimed at changing the content of the individual's cognitions (e.g., by identifying and challenging logical distortions or biases of thinking) were replaced with mindfulness, acceptance and compassion as methods of changing the relationship between the individual and their experience.

Third wave CBT approaches such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) involve a concern with a dialectic of acceptance and change (e.g., change will be possible if I learn to accept the reality of my situation), encouraging the individual to reduce experiential avoidance and instead to tolerate distress by adopting an attitude of nonjudgmental or 'radical acceptance' toward these experiences (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Linehan, 1994). The popularity of these therapies was informed by a number of criticisms of 'second wave' CBT (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Beck, 1979) which argued that techniques aimed at producing cognitive change were insufficiently informed by cognitive science; that there was little evidence that they represented active ingredients providing added value to the techniques of 'first-wave' behavioural therapies; and that they placed too much focus on symptom reduction (Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008).

The increasing popularity of these therapies during the 2000s took place alongside a parallel and ideologically connected movement within mainstream psychology: the project of positive psychology. The establishment of positive psychology as a recognised discipline, which is largely credited to Martin Seligman, commenced with a critique of what was perceived as the bias toward negativity and dysfunction within psychology, with many practitioners and researchers having been focused on the task of healing within the framework of a self-limiting disease model of human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The field of positive psychology covers a range of subject areas regarding human experience and behaviour. For the purposes of this article, positive psychology's proposition that understanding, measuring and promoting happiness and wellbeing ought to be considered a useful scientific project is of particular interest and shall be the focus of this discussion. An influential theory of 'authentic happiness' was developed, comprising three elements: positive emotion, engagement and meaning (Seligman, 2002). The emphasis on authenticity reflected the intention to distinguish this positive-psychological construction of happiness from a lay definition that might emphasise transitory positive emotion and hedonistic pleasure seeking. Later, Seligman (2011) sought to de-emphasise the focus on positive mood by presenting 'wellbeing theory', which comprised the authentic happiness model supplemented with two further elements: achievements and positive relationships. These additional elements appear to bring the work of positive psychology into closer alignment with the discourses utilised by therapies such as MBCT, DBT and ACT: focus on doing what works and becoming more effective in relationships through assertiveness, responding to partners constructively and with compassion, and emphasising praise instead of criticism. In turn, these factors share similarities with some of the theoretical constructs of mindfulness such as non-judging, patience and acceptance. It may be noted that while both positive psychology and mainstream Western psychology more generally share Buddhism's concern with alleviating suffering and promoting happiness and wellbeing (Levine, 2009), these are generally considered as matters for the individual, with factors relating to higher levels of social context (e.g., focusing on personal relationships or seeking meaning by being part of something bigger than oneself) regarded as providing means of securing happiness and wellbeing for the individual. It should be acknowledged that following the broad criticism that positive psychology has neglected wider social contexts beyond the individual, there have been recent

developments within positive psychology toward the study and promotion of group and community wellbeing in a manner which shares useful connections with the field of community psychology (e.g., Marujo & Neto, 2014; Biswas-Diener, 2011).

There can be little doubt that mindfulness has provided some benefits to those seeking assistance from mental health services. The technique of mindfulness meditation has been applied to a wide range of identified clinical problems such as depression (Segal et al., 2002), anxiety (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995), eating disorders (Kristeller, Wolever, & Sheets, 2014), psychosis (Chadwick, Hughes, Russell, Russell, & Dagnan, 2009), substance misuse (Bowen et al., 2006) and medically unexplained symptoms (Fjorback et al., 2013). There has been a rapid and sustained growth in research studies examining the effectiveness of mindfulness since the millennium (Baer, 2003). Within psychotherapy research, the cognitive behavioural therapies have been the most widely researched treatment model, with hundreds of meta-analyses of randomised controlled trials indicating effectiveness across a variety of clinical problems (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012). Arguably, this has been part of a self-reinforcing process in which CBT's hegemonic status as an evidence-based treatment attracts the greater concentration of psychotherapy research funding, with researchers continuing to embark upon the positivist project of seeking further improvement in outcomes; this has led to a closed system in which attention and resources are narrowed and alternative approaches to helping those in distress are marginalised, allowing the underlying theoretical assumptions of CBT to avoid critical examination (Sloan, 2009; Kazdin, 2008; Michell, 2003).

As mindfulness has been incorporated into the repertoire of CBT, it has therefore benefitted from research programmes investigating its effectiveness as an intervention in mental health settings. Systematic reviews have indicated that mindfulness-based interventions can be effective in areas such as improving individual wellbeing and reducing the risk of relapse of depression and they tend to report a moderate effect size (e.g., Ost, 2008). However, the quality of randomised controlled trials can be low, with identifiable problems such as small sample sizes providing limited statistical power, unclear or biased selection procedures, non-randomisation to conditions, and a tendency to compare mindfulness to waiting-list controls rather than any active control groups; such criticisms have been made without questioning the tenets of quantitative psychological research from a critical perspective (e.g., Hunot et al., 2013; Chiesa & Serretti, 2011; Coelho, Canter, & Ernst, 2007). Despite the moderate effectiveness and variable quality of studies, it seems that mindfulness benefits from its association with CBT, affording it the status of being both scientific and effective in popular social discourse.

Just as CBT entered the public consciousness in such a way that constructions such as 'negative automatic thoughts' have become prominent in how people understand themselves, mindfulness has similarly extended beyond the therapy clinic and into the public sphere. Mindfulness is currently one of the most prominent topics within popular psychology and self-help. Mobile phone applications have been downloaded by millions of people, with some of the companies responsible for these applications developing corporate partnerships that allow mindfulness to be offered in consumer spaces such as in-flight entertainment systems, hotel rooms and department stores (e.g., Puddicombe, 2011). The association of the term 'mindfulness' with the recent popularity in adult colouring books (e.g., Farrarons, 2015) perhaps provides an indication of its current level of cultural influence.

Mindfulness training is now offered in a wide range of occupational settings; it promises more effective decision-making for executives in multinational corporations and a method of managing stress for public sector workers (Flaxman et al., 2013). In prisons, mindfulness acts as

a tool for rehabilitation (Shonin, Van Gordon, Slade, & Griffiths, 2013) while mindfulness training in the classroom is used to improve wellbeing and resilience, to reduce stress and to enhance students' productivity (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014; Jennings & Siegel, 2015). In 2014, mindfulness classes were offered to UK Members of Parliament, leading to the creation of a Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group aimed at examining how mindfulness could be applied across a range of policy areas.

3.   Mindfulness, Psychology and Governmentality

It is in the context of this widespread application of mindfulness to various areas of society that a critical examination of it is particularly warranted. Psychological theories and practices often carry underlying assumptions that promote particular ways of being as moral or virtuous due to the historical and cultural context in which they are produced. Mainstream psychology tends to privilege a westernised worldview, which espouses individualising, Christian and capitalist values and marginalises communitarian perspectives (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009). Psychologists carry a social responsibility to recognise the influence of these values and belief systems upon people's lives, particularly in terms of the reduction of the psyche to the individual's freedom to choose and compete for material goods (Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007).

As a technique drawn from Buddhist psychology, mindfulness could carry the potential to subvert dominant values of capitalism by emphasising an Eastern worldview promoting connectedness and community. However, it is this author's contention that the secular practice of mindfulness does not achieve this, and that its politics ought to be considered as distinct from the use of this technique within its traditional Buddhist context. This position follows Carrette and King's (2005) historical account of the development of contemporary spiritual practices in Euro-American culture, in which psychology is seen as one mechanism in a process which has individualised religious experience and has minimised potentially socially transformative aspects of religion. The presence of mindfulness classes in executive boardrooms reflects the way that mindfulness not only leaves capitalism unchallenged, but how it can be used to reinforce the dominant ideologies associated with capitalism.

The dominance of capitalism as a framework for organising society is maintained by overlapping ideologies including neoliberalism, individualism and consumerism (Harvey, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998; Bauman, 2000). These have an organising contextual influence upon personal, relational, social and economic life and sustain unjust social relations including rising levels of inequality between the rich and the poor (Sloan, 2009). The term 'neoliberalism' has been criticised as being overly reductive and, as a result, acting as a convenient and imprecise target for those taking a critical stance toward the capitalist system. Hall (2011) proposes that there are sufficient common features to warrant a provisional conceptual identity and that it is politically necessary to name neoliberalism in order to provide content, a focus and cutting edge to its resistance. The project of neoliberalism is particularly important for psychologists because it involves the active remodelling of society and state in line with the metaphor of economics and competition (Davies, 2014) and psychology is implicated in the process of influencing citizens to consider such ways of thinking as natural and common sense. It has been argued that psychology provides one of the most potent methods of acting upon citizens in that rather than regulating,

persuading or educating others, psychology and psychotherapy 'transform their personhood, their ways of experiencing themselves and their world so that they understand and explain the meaning and nature of life-conduct in fundamentally new ways' (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 147). Foucault's (1988a) concept of governmentality is particularly useful in theorising the operation of power within neoliberal societies.

For Foucault, power does not operate simply through overt practices of domination by those in authority. Instead, he argued that ever since the Enlightenment and its assumptions of reason, progress, and a belief in the autonomous human subject, our knowledge about human subjectivity has been systematically ordered through the shaping of discourse, particularly through professional and academic institutions, and these discourses have come to form the basis of societal relations of power. Foucault (1980) used the term 'power/knowledge' to refer to this process, in which certain discourses become dominant and act as 'regimes of truth', while others become subjugated.

In his later work, Foucault (1988a, 1988b) increasingly emphasised the role of the individual in this process. Governmentality refers to the point of contact between technologies of domination and technologies of the self, to examine the operation of power/knowledge within neoliberal capitalist societies. Rather than simply being a passive recipient of technologies of power, the individual was seen as actively constituting themselves; seeking to find self-expression within the context of the normative gaze of society which determines the acceptability or otherwise of our beliefs and actions. Foucault (1988b) described the individual's attempts to constitute their identity as using technologies of the self, one feature of which being the distinguishing of oneself from the physical body in order to be in a position to act upon it. Psychology and related professions have provided ways of understanding ourselves, which have given shape to our subjectivities. As psychology's influence has spread across society, greater numbers of the population have come to understand themselves within the frameworks of individualised states of psychological mindedness, and so they turn to psychology for assistance in times of difficulty or for guidance in constructing a happy life (Rose, 1989). From a critical perspective, psychology can be seen as offering people methods of reconstituting themselves in a manner which is better adjusted to the demands and expectations of life under capitalism, with those turning to psychology being willing to engage in changing themselves in the hope of finding happiness and wellbeing: this represents a form of acting upon individuals without the need for coercion. The political shift toward the governmental programme of neoliberalism instituted by the Thatcher/Reagan governments and continued in the West since then has involved an emphasis on the sovereignty of the free market, and a view of the role of the state as being limited to the safeguarding of individual liberty and property rights (Miller & Rose, 2008). Hall (2011) quotes from a 1975 speech by Thatcher as a summary of neoliberal ideology:

'Let me give you my vision: a man's right to work as he will, to spend what he earns, to own property, to have the State as servant not as master: these are the British inheritance. They are the essence of a free country and on that freedom all our other freedoms depend'. (Thatcher, 1975; quoted in Hall, 2011; p. 706).

By extension, neoliberalism also involves a moral perspective: the virtuous individual is one who competes and makes free choices within markets, is adaptable to changes in circumstances, takes risks and who accepts responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Hayek, 1979; Friedman, 1980). Within this ideology, the subject to be governed is thereby constructed through

the lens of neoliberalism: autonomous, showing responsibility and making free choices about how to behave (Miller & Rose, 2008). One factor in the success of neoliberalism, and indeed capitalism, has been the way that it continually adapts and is remade in different contexts. As the concept of governmentality indicates that government partly takes place covertly through regulated choices made by individuals making their way through life, it becomes possible to construct psychology as a technique through which human subjects self-govern by constructing themselves as autonomous individuals who assume personal responsibility for their life situation and choices. The corresponding subjugation of discourses emphasising interconnectedness and socioeconomic causes of unhappiness reflects the rejection of state interference in the individual's affairs within neoliberal ideology.

Psychologists and psychotherapists can be viewed as participating in the production, circulation and management of subjectivity (Parker, 2014) and mindfulness is currently one of the most common methods by which this is being employed. The easy transferability of mindfulness across domains of social life, from mental health settings to employee wellbeing workshops, reflects the degree to which mindfulness acts as a ready tool for the regulation of subjectivity. In this article, it is argued that that mindfulness represents a technology of the self which serves to construct idealised forms of subjectivity that conform to those celebrated by the ideology of neoliberalism. Mindfulness does this in the following ways: it emphasises a concern with the individual; promotes the individual freedom to choose as a central virtue and emphasises personal responsibility; and it encourages a focus on self-improvement.

3.1   Mindfulness Emphasises a Concern with the Individual

As a technique and philosophy of life, secular mindfulness is fundamentally concerned with the individual. The overlapping ideology of individualism is a key aspect of both neoliberalism and mainstream psychology and is based on the social construction of the individual as the fundamental unit of analysis when understanding human life. By treating the individual as a discrete phenomenon to be understood with reference to internal features or processes, the connections between inner experience and external circumstances are obscured (Nightingale & Cromby, 2001). Parker (2007) draws a connection between the development of psychology as a formal system of knowledge and the rise of capitalism in Europe from the late 19th century onwards. As society became organised around discourses of competition and self-interest, owners of industries and workers came to construct themselves as possessing creativity or industriousness which could be turned to their competitive advantage, thus creating a culture in which the discipline of psychology, as a science of the individual, could flourish in Western society (Parker, 2007).

The individualism inherent in secular mindfulness could be seen as reflecting the tendency of 'popular Buddhism' to differ from 'doctrinal Buddhism' in the degree to which practices are influenced by socio-historical and political factors, such that Western meditative practice is more likely to be shaped by a dominant individualist conception of selfhood (Jayasuriya, 2008). This distinction is useful in that it helps to account for the way certain aspects of the Buddhist philosophical system (e.g., those concerned with the individual) can flourish in Western secular practice while others (e.g., those concerned with promoting a freer and more equal society) are less prominent. For instance, *Sangha*, or community, is a central aspect of Buddhism and yet mindfulness programmes often involve private experiences using books and CDs, and classes

tend to involve limited group interaction (Hickey, 2010). From a critical perspective, psychology can be seen as having placed an individualising filter upon Buddhism, with mindfulness emerging as the outcome. Stanley (2012) considers this process from the perspective of how meanings are socially contingent; that is, while there are multiple potential meanings that could be attached to mindfulness, Buddhism has come to be constructed through language use as a psychology. In turn, Buddhist practices such as mindfulness have acquired the ideological and political functions associated with psychology and the individualism associated with it.

A concern with the social can be seen to form one aspect of secular mindfulness discourse. Mindfulness texts often include a critical perspective of contemporary society, with references made to the frantic speed of the technological world and the emptiness of a typical working day in the office. However, they tend to do so from the perspective of the negative impact that the desire to accumulate wealth and possessions has upon individual wellbeing rather than offering a more sociological critique relating to inequality. Mindfulness is then framed as a way of 'finding peace in a frantic world' (Williams & Penman, 2011). For instance, Kabat-Zinn (1994) makes numerous references to Thoreau and Gandhi as inspiration for exchanging the pressures of modern living for a simpler, more mindful and non-harming existence. However, the political activism of these figures (e.g., promoting nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience as methods for creating social change) is discarded in favour of a focus on personal wellbeing. Such an engagement with changing external states of affairs rarely appears within mindfulness texts.

In a discussion about global issues including environmental catastrophe, war and the impact of violence in the media upon children, Kabat-Zinn (2009) frames these issues as presenting the individual with 'world stress' (p. 417), thereby moving from a social focus to an individualised one emphasising the emotional consequences for those exposed to such events via news media. Here, the mindful life is considered to involve regulating one's consumption of the mass media through increased intentionality, and also acting upon the world in addition to acting upon one's personal life: the mindfulness practitioner is invited to identify and work on an important issue in their locality because 'it can be inwardly healing to take some responsibility for outward healing in the world' (p. 420). Similarly, Gilbert (2005) cites many of the miseries imposed by globalised capitalism before briefly proposing that a psychology of compassion be offered as a method of changing society; however, the focus then returns to examine the use of compassion within individual psychotherapy at length. In both cases, these attempts to engage with promoting change at higher levels of social context – which appear as isolated examples within the broader mindfulness literature – seem to privilege the individual over society; either by considering social action as a form of promoting individual wellbeing, or by carrying an underlying assumption that social problems might emerge from changes at the level of the individual.

In a passage discussing issues of work-related stress, Kabat-Zinn (2009) acknowledges that some working conditions are toxic in terms of presenting dangers to health or being psychologically demeaning and exploitative, before returning the focus of concern to the level of the individual:

'Yet, given that many job descriptions will not be rewritten in the short run to lower employee stress, people are forced to cope as best they can using their own resources. The degree to which you are affected by stressful circumstances can be influenced positively by your own coping skills' (p. 387).

As this example indicates, those practicing mindfulness are instructed to direct their efforts toward meditation, learning to focus their attention on the present moment and to become more aware of their inner experiences, in order to better tolerate an intolerable situation. While it is useful to recognise the impact that injustice and hardship has upon psychological wellbeing, the theory and locus of change involved in mindfulness appears to draw attention away from the possibility of addressing these issues directly. Mindfulness carries the embedded suggestion that the individual must adjust to the realities in which they find themselves; it is not the world that must change. The dialectic of acceptance and change associated with mindfulness-based psychotherapies describes a process in which the person must accept their situation and change their behaviour; not to be accepting of their behaviour and to change their situation.

Throughout mindfulness discourse, the overall moral value placed upon the pursuit of individual happiness remains unchallenged: consumerism is criticised because it does not provide happiness. Therefore, mindfulness practitioners are invited to stop buying things and to use an alternative, more effective way of finding happiness and peace of mind. Mindfulness discourse would not oppose collective happiness; it merely directs its focus elsewhere. This underlying individualism is one of the factors that have made mindfulness acceptable as a therapeutic technique in Western society.

3.2 Mindfulness Promotes the Individual Freedom to Choose as a Central Virtue and Emphasises Personal Responsibility

One might suppose that the aforementioned critical perspective of contemporary Western society as frantic would be suggestive of mindfulness presenting a challenge to capitalist ideologies, such as by reducing suggestibility to advertising (Rosenberg, 2004). However, this is not necessarily the case. In Baudrillard's (1998) account of consumer society, a distinction is made between 'reality' and the coded system of signs that represents consumption. According to mindfulness discourse, mindfulness offers the individual a way of becoming more aware of this system of signs and learning to engage more fully with the reality offered by direct experience. For instance, eating would become an active choice in response to internal hunger and satiation cues rather than being an automatic habit influenced by routine or marketing strategies. In this way, mindfulness can be seen as contributing to the idealisation of authenticity within psychological and cultural discourse (e.g., Seligman, 2002). Yet the anti-consumerist stance of mindfulness can be seen as secondary to the consumer context in which mindfulness is presented. When practised as a tool in the pursuit of individual happiness, for instance, mindfulness exchanges one system of signs for another: the accumulation of external consumer objects is discarded in favour of a technique that seeks to render the experiences as consumer objects themselves. In line with the fetishisation of the present moment, an activity such as going for a walk outdoors becomes recast as an opportunity for practicing the self-discipline of appreciating sights, sounds and smells from moment to moment. In a sense, the product being sold by the mindfulness industry is not a self-help book or a technique, but the promise of an improved self; a self who is more aware, who can gain more from life and who is more resilient. When considered from Baudrillard's (1998) perspective on consumerism, mindfulness sells anti-consumerism and instead positions the individuals as a consumer of their own experience.

The freedom to choose is a central value in neoliberalism and represents a fundamental condition for the operation of a free market capitalist economy (Friedman, 1980). It is due to the

belief in the free market as the ideal system for the spontaneous creation of social order that state interventions such as protectionism or the artificial fixing of prices or wages are seen as impeding the ability of the market to function at its optimum through competition. This freedom of the individual agent to participate in the market may be contrasted with alternative perspectives which consider freedom in terms of the right of self-determination for all, including vulnerable and marginalised groups (Touraine, 2001). Mindfulness practices are centred upon the development of the individual's capacity to become more attuned to the present moment and to make active choices about how to respond to stimuli. As a widespread practice that expounds the virtues of the individual's freedom to choose as a route to a more fulfilled life, mindfulness discourse arguably reinforces neoliberal capitalism's valuing of individual freedom of choice. Mindfulness offers flexibility and responsiveness in making decisions, which are both features of the ideal neoliberal agent. For instance, in a passage concerned with the freedom to choose, Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn (2007) state that mindful awareness 'expands the field of choices available to us and increases the likelihood that we will make healthy, wise, skilful choices rather than being carried along by the momentum of what we habitually do' (p. 206-207).

While offering the freedom to choose, mindfulness discourse often makes moral assumptions that critical psychologists would recognise as common within mainstream psychology. There is no explicit discussion of a moral framework such as one would observe within Buddhism, in which moral conduct is seen as part of moving along the Path toward Enlightenment (Hickey, 2010). The freedom to make 'healthy, wise, skilful' choices described by Williams et al. (2007) highlights the presence of a moral constraint placed upon the secular mindfulness practitioner: one is free to choose, but encouraged to make certain choices. Mindfulness discourse frequently utilises the language of wisdom when describing certain aspects of its morality. The term 'wise mind' is used to describe a state of mind in which the individual is informed by both reason and sensitivity to emotion (Linehan, 1993); this provides a form of moral framework in which the improper use of emotion when making choices would be seen as relatively 'unwise'. The moral framework underpinning secular mindfulness may be drawn from its socio-political context: it is 'wise' to pursue happiness (albeit by paradoxically exchanging striving or doing with 'non-doing' as the preferred method of pursuit); to make effective decisions; to accept 'reality' rather than wish one's circumstances were different; to be flexible and present in one's life rather than having fixed, automatic reactions, etc. These moral positions are shared with many psychotherapeutic models and serve the self-governing social function required by neoliberalism by encouraging those practicing mindfulness to approach life as an enterprise, to attempt to overcome social constraints through personal endeavour and thereby conform to the requirements of the competitive society.

The promotion of individual freedom of choice brings a corresponding assumption of personal responsibility. According to Kabat-Zinn (1994), 'the whole point of mindfulness-based stress reduction… is to challenge and encourage people to become their own authorities, to take more responsibility for their own lives, their own bodies, their own health' (p. 191-192). This describes Foucault's (1988b) account of self-government within neoliberal capitalist society precisely. By alienating the self from its own thoughts and feelings and then emphasising both freedom of choice and personal responsibility, the mindfulness practitioner enters into a set of limiting discourses about their life experiences and circumstances. For instance, unhappiness may be seen as a reflection of one's own poor choices and actions (rather than related to social factors); as material for practicing those techniques such as mindfulness via a self-referential

loop; and as something to be accepted and tolerated rather than necessarily acted upon. As previously suggested, 'accepting reality' can be seen as a contributing factor in the suppression of any politically critical perspective within secular mindfulness.

This argument is in line with the liberation social psychology of Martín-Baró (1994), particularly in terms of the degree to which mainstream psychology is seen as neglecting to take into account structural sources of oppression in society and thereby functioning to reinforce them. Indeed, one could argue that any liberatory potential of mindfulness that could be drawn from its Buddhist roots (e.g., Carrette & King, 2005) instead performs the opposite function in secular mindfulness practice, with oppressive social relations in external reality being obscured in favour of a focus on how the individual responds to internal self-critical or judgemental thoughts. Hickey (2010) comments on there being a discrepancy between the relative material prosperity of participants in outcome studies of mindfulness programmes and the general population, and suggests that interventions that appear to be effective for individuals who are less affected by structural inequalities are offered as a solution to those in relative poverty. From within a liberation orientation, psychological theories and techniques should be considered from the perspective of the oppressed other and developed in collaboration with those affected by structural oppression (Montero & Sonn, 2009). When human suffering arises from inequalities such as those associated with poverty, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability or social class, it should be recognised as such. By importing a packaged set of concepts and techniques to be applied to all individuals as a panacea, secular mindfulness does not engage with liberation from oppressive circumstances in any meaningful way. Through its promotion of acceptance and its invitation to take personal responsibility for one's choices, secular mindfulness can instead be seen as functioning as a tool of oppression in which improved self-awareness is encouraged at the expense of the raising of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

3.3   Mindfulness Encourages a Focus on Self-Improvement

The mindfulness industry may be viewed as psychologising and individualising distress; yet it achieves this not through the exercise of power, but by presenting mindfulness as an attractive technique of self-improvement in such a way that individuals adopt it for themselves. Alongside wisdom (referred to above), narratives relating to health and skilfulness can be considered aspects of the emphasis upon self-improvement that is inherent in mindfulness discourse.

The contemporary concern with 'healthism' as a form of self-improvement has been a focus of critical attention (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Crawford, 2006). One aspect of the social construction of health under capitalism has been the way that it has developed moral connotations by virtue of the attribution of health to the ideal neoliberal agent: accordingly, to be 'unhealthy' is a reflection of one's poor character. This bio-morality, which leads individuals to seek self-expression through the pursuit of health by methods such as dieting, gym membership, and activity-tracking using wearable technology, for instance, represents a key means by which the operation of power through self-discipline described by Foucault (1988b) takes place: in a society which celebrates the strong, independent and autonomous individual, health becomes both naturalised and idealised and so individuals are naturally inclined to construct themselves as 'better' people. Healthism includes not only a concern with the physical, but extends to what is constructed as a healthy mind, healthy relationships and a healthy balance of pleasure and responsibility (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). When mindfulness discourse promotes the freedom

to make healthy choices, it implicitly encourages the mindfulness practitioners to behave in normative ways with regards to that which is deemed healthy. As a technique for promoting happiness and wellbeing in schools, workplaces and in other nonclinical settings, health discourses may be employed as practitioners use mindfulness in the pursuit of a 'healthy mind' in the hope of achieving benefits such as improved cognitive functioning (e.g., Burch & Penman, 2013; Chiesa, Carati, & Serretti, 2011).

Mindfulness discourse promotes an ideal of effectiveness, as reflected in the following passage by Williams and Penman (2011):

'Mindful acceptance does not mean resignation to your fate… it grants you the freedom to choose – to step outside your looming problems – and in the process liberates you from unhappiness, fear, anxiety and exhaustion. This gives you far greater control over your life. But most important of all, it allows you to deal with problems in the most effective way possible and at the most appropriate moment.' (p. 40).

This emphasis on effectiveness provides a clear example of the way that mindfulness can function to produce the ideal neoliberal agent. One fundamental aspect of neoliberalism is its incorporation of uncertainty, which encourages the state, organisations and individuals to be prepared for unexpected problems without necessarily attempting to prevent them (Davies, 2014). Effectiveness and efficiency are key virtues within neoliberalism due to the construction of society and state within a business metaphor and the capitalist value placed upon that which is profitable. If one is to be a productive and valuable worker, then approaching one's life as an enterprise and in the most efficient and effective way possible is essential. Just as the project of neoliberalism encourages a discourse in which governments are to be measured and evaluated on the degree to which public finances and services are managed efficiently, the individual is similarly viewed in such a manner. Hence, neoliberal ideology involves placing an injunction upon the individual in contemporary society to be the best person they can be by maximising their health, wealth and personal happiness.

The secular practice of mindfulness is not performed merely to achieve a sense of peace. There is an encouragement to commit to optimising oneself by adopting behaviour that achieves one's goals and improves productivity (Flaxman et al., 2013; Hayes, 2004; Linehan, 1993). In this way, mindfulness can be seen as complementing the neoliberal construction of the self as entrepreneur. This connects with the critique of popular psychology set out by De Vos (2015) who adopts a post-Fordist perspective by describing how different aspects of self are artificially separated in a way that allows for the commodification of one's own subjectivity: by viewing one's selfhood as an enterprise, one may treat the brain and mind as commodities to be harnessed in the interest of generating improved value: the mindfulness industry profits from selling not only happiness, but the promise of a better self. This represents a view of mindfulness as not only alienating the individual from society due to its focus on the individual; mindfulness alienates the self from its own experiences.

One striking feature of mindfulness, which also acts as a way in which it is distinguished from alternative methods of self-improvement, is the way it proposes non-doing as a means to achieving this end. This issue is pertinent to the manner in which mindfulness functions as a technique of governmentality. During meditation, mindfulness practitioners position themselves as being in a state of 'non-doing' in contrast to the habitual 'doing mode' characterised by problem-solving and goal-oriented behaviour, on the basis that this provides a more effective

method of making decisions. Goals such as relaxation, happiness, improved wellbeing and effective decision-making are similarly pursued paradoxically through a method of non-pursuit during mindfulness meditation. As a form of governmentality, this allows the mindfulness industry to imply that mindfulness is a unique form of self-improvement by suggesting that previous attempts to improve the self by other methods have failed because they represent more of the same ineffective 'doing', rather than 'being' or 'non-doing'. In line with Rimke's (2000) critique of self-help, mindfulness can be seen as a psychological technology of the self that appropriates neoliberalism's view of the effective and responsible individual by promoting the idea of self-improvement as an important life project, which contributes to the governmental management of the population. One important feature of mindfulness is that the practitioner is expected to commit themselves to sustaining a regular mindfulness practice as an ongoing practice in order to maintain any benefits; in this way, mindfulness is not a technique used intermittently to promote happiness when required, but becomes a lifelong project of self-improvement and self-discipline by being effective through the degree to which it is used to organise one's subjectivity. People may seek greater autonomy through mindfulness but, by reducing the possibility of socio-political action in favour of individual self-discipline and self-improvement, they may find that such autonomy remains elusive. From a Foucauldian perspective, mindfulness may involve a friendly form of self-surveillance, but it is self-surveillance nonetheless.

4.   Conclusion

This article has put forward the argument that mindfulness, in its current secular usage, seeks to promote individual wellbeing and happiness in a manner that reinforces the ideological assumptions underlying contemporary capitalist society. The growing popularity of mindfulness as a way of promoting inner peace and personal wellbeing at a time of widespread economic hardship and rising levels of social inequality is ethically questionable. This secular usage of mindfulness can be considered as distinct from its place within Buddhist practice, whereby a narrow and decontextualized form of therapeutic mindfulness predominates (Brazier, 2013). In Cohen's (2010) critical account of the psychologisation of Buddhism, the success of mindfulness as a secular therapeutic activity isolated from its cultural context is a reflection of the way that 'Buddhism appears overwhelmed by the Western sense of entitlement to happiness irrespective of our moral conduct' (p. 111). Cohen (2010) describes how the Buddha's conception of happiness was firmly connected to conceptions of morality and that the individual pursuit of happiness in the absence of any enlightened view of the world is central to our collective problems.

It would appear that Buddhism carries the potential for social change and collective wellbeing, but that using mindfulness as an isolated technique will not achieve this. While personal change does not necessarily exclude social change and can indeed be an important part of it (Parker, 2007), it is striking that Buddhist perspectives that could potentially promote collective wellbeing are not prevalent. From a community psychology perspective, examples might include the promotion of loving kindness and collaboration in social contexts where an emphasis on competition is firmly in evidence, or employing free meditation sessions in consumer spaces as a form of direct action to encourage shoppers to 'think before they spend'.

With the exception of the latter, it may of course be noted that community psychologists would not need to turn to Buddhism to employ methods of promoting collective wellbeing. Mindfulness promises improved wellbeing by encouraging self-awareness through focused attention on the present moment and non-judgemental acceptance of one's experiences, thoughts and feelings. In contrast, critical and community psychologists would place a greater emphasis on socio-political awareness, drawing on concepts such as critical consciousness or 'outsight' rather than insight and self-awareness – and for that awareness to be accompanied by corresponding action (e.g., Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Smail, 2005; Freire, 1970).

This article has been produced due to this author's perception that psychologists and those who turn to psychology for help have been strikingly accepting of mindfulness. Although psychologists do not explicitly intend to reinforce capitalist ideologies, this can be an unintended consequence where there is a lack of critical attention applied to the ideas and techniques they use (Parker, 2007). While mindfulness can certainly be valuable to those in distress, its application in an increasing variety of social contexts appears to be promoting an individualised construction of the self that ultimately promotes personal wellbeing over collective wellbeing, and thereby distracts from the possibility of more transformative social and political change.

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