



## Kaleidoscope or Chaos? Making Sense of a Mindfulness Miscellany

A Review of

*Psychology of Mindfulness*

by Kimiyo Murata-Soraci (Ed.)

New York, NY: Nova Publishers, 2014. 225 pp. ISBN

978-1-62948-638-3 (hardcover); 978-1-62948-642-0 (electronic).

\$150.00.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038290>

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With the cover of *Time* magazine recently touting mindfulness as a means to find “peace in a stressed-out digitally dependent culture,” psychology’s mindfulness revolution appears poised to attain ever loftier heights of social acceptance. Certainly its appeal within the field of psychology is remarkably widespread. A quick search of *PsycINFO* reveals that no fewer than 40 books and 369 peer-reviewed articles with “mindfulness” in the title appeared in 2013 alone. In September 2014, an additional 32 books and 299 articles emblazoned with the mindfulness tag had appeared. Interest in the topic is both broad and deep, with titles focusing on mindfulness-based interventions or the role of mindfulness processes in nearly every conceivable setting, from primary care to secondary education. Mindfulness skills have also found application with nearly every population from Latino adolescents in rural U.S. communities (Edwards, Adams, Waldo, Hadfield, & Biegel, 2014) to Zen practitioners in the Israeli desert (Arbel, 2014).

### An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Given the scope and depth of recent mindfulness research, the title of Kimiyo Murata-Soraci’s (2014) edited volume, *Psychology of Mindfulness*, marks out an ambitiously broad domain. Indeed, it is difficult to think of an area within the field of psychology as it is currently practiced for which mindfulness would not prove relevant in some way. In this respect, *Psychology of Mindfulness* does not disappoint. Its chapters, which range from commentaries on Buddhist texts to meditations on interspecies human-animal relations, cover a formidable expanse of intellectual terrain. In addition, the volume is admirably interdisciplinary with contributors from philosophy (Dr. Murata-Soraci is herself a philosopher), art history, clinical and counseling psychology, and medicine. It is likely that professionals from any of these disciplines could find content that is of interest in the volume, though bridges between disciplines are not clearly drawn and few readers are likely to find use for content that could be far outside their sphere of practice. Moreover, it should

be noted that the volume is strikingly international in composition with contributors from the United States, Japan, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, demonstrating the global reach of mindfulness research and practice.

A common thread tying together all of this diverse work from such varied disciplines and perspectives is, as Murata-Soraci observes in her introductory essay, "concern and disquietude about the dualistic stance" of Western thought and science. The authors in this volume, she contends, are especially attuned to "the menace of objectivism" and seek "ways of overcoming the tyranny of the I" (p. x). This critical perspective, it is fair to say, differentiates the investigations in this volume from, say, a catalog of mindfulness exercises or a collection of recent findings regarding empirical support for mindfulness-based interventions. Mindfulness for many of the authors in this volume offers a point of departure from Cartesian thinking and points the way toward integration of mind and body, subject and object. Jones, for example, in the chapter entitled, "From the Heart: Compassionate Knowing in the *Heart* and *Diamond Sutras*," notes that human exceptionalism at the heart of Baconian humanism and Cartesian science is "the root of our suffering" and "the sin of separation from all that is, was, and will be" (p. 8). Through the "silent celebration" of compassionate knowing as depicted in the *Heart Sutra*, Jones suggests that the separateness of *homo specialis*, along with its division between mind and body, can drop away and the self can be experienced as "just the pulsations of atrial and ventricular contractions of blood flows delivered from the heart of reality" (p. 9). The Jones essay sets the tone for the volume's sporadic emphasis on mindfulness as a vehicle for a liberating perspective, particularly one that undermines what is taken to be an illusory separation between mind and body.

There are, however, within *Psychology of Mindfulness*, perspectives that challenge aspects of nondual philosophy. Blaser's chapter, "No Mindfulness without Self Boundaries," for example, laments the breakdown of boundaries between inside and outside world, noting that both Buddhist writings and Western culture seek the dissolution of the isolated self. Western culture, however, Blaser observes, erodes the boundaries of the self through seduction of the attention with external objects, undermining any sense of privacy and spreading the attention across innumerable, always available targets. He argues that mindfulness as a contemplative practice is possible only through clearly defined self-boundaries that allow for a sense of "here" to counterbalance constant societal pressures to be "there." Sugiura and Sugiura's chapter, an empirical study of the efficacy of "decentering," or metacognitive awareness of thoughts and emotions, as a putative mechanism of action for mindfulness-based interventions, appears almost wholly inconsistent with Murata-Soraci's critique of objectivism, at least from a methodological perspective. The study concludes that trait variables associated with personality account for the effects of cognitive skills associated with mindfulness when predicting depression and finds no evidence for the influence of mindfulness on effective problem-solving.

Several chapters describing mindfulness-based interventions and the current state of empirical evidence for these interventions complement the volume's theoretical essays. Interventions discussed include dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and of course, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Although these chapters are generally succinct, they are not, it must be noted, exceptionally coherent. For example, Garo and Edwards describe ACT as advocating experiencing "thoughts, emotions, and sensations without attempting to change or avoid them" and as "involved in reducing maladaptive thinking patterns." Although one could envision

perspectives from which both of these assertions are valid, no acknowledgement or explanation of the seeming contradiction is provided. The definition of “mindfulness-based intervention” is also inconsistent throughout the volume. While Garo and Edwards reference DBT and ACT as mindfulness-based therapies in their contribution, McAbee, Labbe, and Drayer, in a chapter entitled, “Mindfulness-based Interventions: Evaluating the Biopsychosocial Effects for Patients with Cancer,” confine their discussion exclusively to MBSR, omitting the ACT studies with oncology populations, as well as “other types of meditation. . .practices” (p. 89), without explanation.

## Many Things to Many People

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In the end, *Psychology of Mindfulness* paints a picture of mindfulness that is polymorphous, fragmentary, and potentially unwieldy. Eclectic in the extreme, the volume offers a “kitchen sink” collection of Buddhists, phenomenologists, postmodernism, and rational empiricism – from Gilles Deleuze on Proust (cited in Trutty-Cohill’s chapter on mindfulness and memory) to Albert Bandura on self-efficacy (cited in Sugiura and Sugiura’s empirical investigation of cognitive decentering in positive psychology) without a sufficient organizational or conceptual framework to afford coherence. It is a rare volume, one must acknowledge, that comprises both poststructuralism and structural equation modeling. The diversity of viewpoints contributes to a sense of disorganization that pervades the volume. Basic differences in the ways that the term “mindfulness” has been employed, such as the distinction between Langer’s (1989) definition of mindfulness as flexible metacognitive attention and the recent emphasis in mindfulness-based psychological interventions on the compassion and acceptance dimensions of mindfulness (e.g., Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2009), are not explored. Part of what is missing in such a wide ranging volume is a historical perspective regarding the development of mindfulness as a psychological construct from Eastern philosophy to contemporary Western psychological science. Readers seeking this integrated historical perspective, which provides a framework for understanding the diverse ways that mindfulness has been applied across various disciplines and periods, are directed to McCown, Reibel, and Micozzi’s (2010) *Teaching Mindfulness*, as well as Didonna and Kabat-Zinn’s (2009) *Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness*. It is ultimately unclear why the specific collection of papers assembled here belong together. Also, this lack of coherence characterizes several of the individual contributions themselves, which lack both organization and clearly stated objectives and rationales. The poor quality of editing and proofreading throughout, with omitted words and infelicitous phrasings, exacerbates this impression of disorganization.

One could argue that the varieties of experience and practice to which the label “mindfulness” is applied are so varied as to render the term virtually meaningless. If “mindfulness” can mean so many different things to such different people (e.g., if it can be simultaneously the establishment of a boundary and the dissolution of all boundaries), then how does one know to which form or variant of mindfulness a given author refers? Either one must allow that “mindfulness,” like other terms that are both the names for vital experiences and psychological constructs, such as “happiness” or “love,” is in the eye of the beholder or insist upon careful operationalization and contextualization of the term. Much of *Psychology of Mindfulness* lacks the precision required for the latter approach. It does, however, exemplify the creativity inherent in the former.

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