

## Beyond Me: Mindful Responses to Social Threat

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For millennia, philosophers and spiritual leaders have pointed out that attempts to secure our “selves,” even at the expense of others, are a primary source—if not the source—of personal distress and interpersonal strife (Waldron, 2003). Many traditional moral and religious cultures have focused on modifying the expression of behavior to ameliorate the excesses of self-centeredness, egotism, and other problematic products of self-identification (Leary, 2004; Waldron, 2003), but there has also been long-standing interest, especially among Asian and several Western contemplative and scholarly traditions, in “taking a look inside” to closely examine the properties and operation of the self and to investigate qualities of consciousness that can facilitate more adaptive ways of being with oneself and others.

In this chapter, we consider theory and findings from our program of research on mindfulness that begin to integrate these traditions with contemporary research psychology. Mindfulness is an exemplar of the experiential mode of conscious processing and concerns a receptive state of mind wherein attention, informed by a sensitive awareness of what is occurring in the present, simply observes what is taking place; this is in contrast to the conceptually driven mode of processing, in which occurrences are habitually filtered through cognitive appraisals, evaluations, memories, beliefs, and other forms of cognitive manipulation (see Brown & Cordon, in press, and Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007, for reviews). We discuss how mindfulness can facilitate personal and relational well-being through an easing of self-identification, or ego quieting. Our domain of interest is one in which such identification is known to be easily aroused, and the consequences of which are legion—when the self is under threat by others.

### **The Mental Construction of Me**

Study of the self has been of key interest to psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, sociologists, and, more recently, neuroscientists, and this wide-

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spread interest reflects the centrality of the self to human experience. Two views of self predominate today, namely, (a) what McAdams (1990) described as the "I" self, which has been studied within organismic theories (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991), and (b) the "Me" self, which has been central to social constructionist views of self. Of particular interest to the present discussion is the Me self, which is derived from the Mead-Cooley tradition (Ryan, 1993) and concerns the creation of personal identity. This Me self involves an identification with particular attributes, roles, group memberships, and belief systems that effectively narrow down competing possibilities for thought and action that are both derived from and consistent with the social inputs and appraisals to which one has been exposed over time (e.g., Gilbert, 2005). This personal identity is a mental model, formed from ongoing life experiences and cognitive elaborations on those experiences and inseparable from the larger social and cultural contexts in which it is formed and continually operates, even in individualistic societies (e.g., Waldron, 2003). Together, these characteristics highlight a view of identity as dynamic, constructed, contingent, and, perhaps most important, an emergent property of the mind and brain, not an entity in its own right.

The existence of personal identifications and internalized constructions contributes to the lay view of self; specifically, people generally regard themselves as substantial—distinct from other selves and objects; as individual—unique and indivisible; and as essential—relatively constant or the same over time (Metzinger, 2003). Perhaps most critical for the present analysis is that humans treat their mental self-representations as if they were real. This has two important implications for social interactions. The first implication is that, in real or imagined interactions, self-related thoughts and feelings are engaged and then feed back to influence the way individuals behave. In this way, social exchanges can be viewed as interactions between the self-representations of those individuals, in which each person's perceptions, reactions, and responses to the other are filtered through and mediated by his or her internalized views of self and other (Leary, 2002). A second implication of the reified self for social interactions is that when it is threatened, people respond in defensive ways.

Most immediately, defensive response to social threat is manifest as a mental, emotional, and/or behavioral reaction to events and experiences on the basis of how they affect, or could affect, the identity. This reflects one form of primary appraisal: Events and experiences are judged as bad, good, or neutral in reference to Me. When perceived as bad, such events or experiences are treated as threatening or harmful, something with which one then has to cope in some way. However, judgment of the opposite kind is also problematic; even when judged as good for Me, those events or experiences will inevitably end, something that can again be regarded as threatening or harmful when personal identity is projected into the future. These self-relevant and inevitably biased judgments can negatively influence psychological well-being, the quality of social relationships, and ways one negotiates the social world. More problematic still, this evaluative reactivity to events and experiences may occur nonconsciously because, over time, our reactions can become habitual and automated (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Thus, quality of experience may be

compromised without notice and without apparent (i.e., a consciously known) cause. Because personal identity is a central preoccupation for the individual (e.g., see chap. 12, this volume; Gaertner & Sedikides, 2005), and because events and experiences regularly impinge on it that require maintenance and protection, a final consequence of self-identification is that a great deal of life energy may be spent in the service of Me, with a variety of associated costs (e.g., see chap. 6, this volume; Crocker & Park, 2004; Ryan, 1993). Finally, when so deeply invested in it—when one presumes that one is this Me—the individual may have little access to other aspects of the self that reflect more authentic functioning (e.g., unbiased processing of self-relevant information; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; see also chap. 8, this volume).

### **Mindful Attention as Antidote to Self-Identification**

If investment in identity, or the Me self, is problematic, then how can the individual have a more adaptive relationship to one's self? From one perspective, the proposition appears quixotic, given the deeply entrenched, pervasively influential nature of identity. Yet theorists informed by both Buddhist and organismic psychologies (e.g., Leary, 2004; Ryan, 1993) argue that a primary way that identity is fueled is by a lack of awareness of our thought patterns, emotional reactions, desires, and behavioral tendencies. This view suggests that if one could get a clear, moment-to-moment look at one's ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, then the automatic flow of self-representations could be interrupted, their constructed nature seen more clearly, and responses could be made with more choice instead of in reaction to identity-based productions (Rabinowitz, 2006). This view argues for the value of an observant stance on our experience—a self-as-knower, not as an agent of reflexive cognition, in which attention simply informs thought about the self, as in "self-awareness" (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972), but instead as an inner witness, in which the contents of consciousness—including self-relevant thoughts, images, and identities—and one's overt behavior are on display.

One conceptualization of this basic witnessing capacity is mindfulness, in which internal and external events and occurrences are simply seen as phenomena "rather than as the objects of a conceptually constructed world" (Olendzki, 2005, p. 253). Bringing such open, receptive attention to bear on experience may permit a clearer recognition that self-representations are simply mental concepts; that is, in observing that thoughts come and go; memories arise and replace each other; desires emerge, develop, change, and vanish, and so on, the identity may become less substantial and engrossing, allowing for disidentification with it—that is, when the functioning of the Me can be observed, then one is clearly not that Me. Theorists argue that because mindfulness permits an immediacy of contact with events as they occur, without the overlay of discriminative, categorical, and habitual thought, consciousness takes on a clarity and freshness that reduce reactivity and permit more objectively informed responses, unbiased by self-centered biases and prejudices (e.g., Nyanaponika Thera, 1973).

## Mindfulness and Social Threat

As an open or receptive attention, mindfulness may facilitate exposure, or nondefensive processing of threatening experience (e.g., Baer, 2003), leading to desensitization and a reduction in emotional reactivity; a greater tolerance of unpleasant states; and, consequently, more adaptive responding in social and other situations in which self-representations are under threat. Thus, more mindful individuals should show lower levels of anger, anxiety, and other emotional responses in social threat situations that represent a disengagement from the “urgencies of risk assessment” (Allen & Knight, 2005, p. 250) and should manifest cognitive and behavioral responses that reflect greater tolerance, less judgment (including censorship, condemnation, and exclusion), and, more generally, less concern for the status of personal identity in social threat contexts. In the remainder of this chapter, we present preliminary evidence that mindfulness supports nondefensive processing in three social contexts in which identity is commonly threatened: (a) romantic relationship conflict, (b) social exclusion by members of an ingroup, and (c) worldview rejection by an outgroup member.

### *Romantic Relationship Conflict*

A primary basis for identity is a presumed dichotomy between self and not-self that, at the interpersonal level, is reflected in images of self, other, and the relationship, developed from learning experiences and memories of how one was viewed and treated by the other, how one adjusted behavior to maximize reward and minimize punishment, and so on (Rabinowitz, 2006). These mental representations of self and other can color the perception and interpretation of past events and present interactions (Leary, 2002), perhaps most strongly when images of the self and “my” relationship are threatened by conflict. In such circumstances, self-protective strategies, including avoidance, withdrawal, or aggression, may be invoked to minimize personal hurt, threats to self-esteem, and loss of power (Epstein & Baucom, 2003). When the identity is engaged in this way, direct, unmediated contact with the other is inhibited.

Romantic relationships are a primary arena in which the engagement of images of self and other can have detrimental effects. The investment of self in the partner and the relationship, coupled with an attachment to seeing the relationship unfold in particular ways, represents psychological tinder for couple conflict. However, mindfulness may have value in couple conflict situations through processes that reflect an abeyance of the ego. For example, the receptive attentiveness that defines mindfulness may promote a greater ability or willingness to take interest in a partner’s thoughts, emotions, and welfare and thereby to be less invested in one’s own reactions. Boorstein (1996) argued that mindfulness promotes an ability to witness thoughts and emotions so as not to react impulsively and destructively to them. Through a willingness to contact experience directly rather than defend against it, mindfulness may promote attunement, connection, and closeness in relationships (e.g., Welwood, 1996).

Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, and Rogge (2007) conducted two studies to examine the role of mindfulness in romantic relationship function-

ing, with a particular interest in examining how this quality of consciousness affects responses to relationship stress. In the initial, 10-week longitudinal study with dating college students, the authors found that dispositional mindfulness, assessed with the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003), was associated with greater capacities to respond constructively to relationship stress. For example, Barnes et al. (2007) found, after controlling for gender, length of relationship, and time spent together each month, that higher mindfulness was related to greater accommodation (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991)—a self-reported willingness to inhibit tendencies to act destructively, and instead to respond constructively, when the romantic partner had acted in a way that was potentially destructive to the relationship.

In the second study, Barnes et al. (2007) tested whether mindfulness would predict more adaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses in the heat of a relationship conflict. Using a conflict discussion paradigm, they asked steadily dating heterosexual partners to engage in a discussion of the most conflictual issues currently challenging the relationship. The authors found that for both members of the couple, dispositional MAAS scores predicted lower emotional stress reactions—hostility and anxiety—to the conflict, and these effects were explained by lower hostility and anxiety, respectively, measured on entry into the discussion. These results showed that instead of simply buffering the effects of emotional reactions during conflict, mindfulness helped inoculate individuals against the arising of those reactions. The capacity of mindfulness to inhibit reactivity to conflict was also evident in the cognitive judgments that each partner made; those higher in trait mindfulness showed a more positive (or less negative) pre-post conflict change in their perception of the partner and the relationship. The study also supported the importance of a mindful state in challenging exchanges, in that state, or current mindfulness was related to several indicators of better communication quality, as assessed by objective raters.

Both of Barnes et al.'s (2007) studies lend support to the notion that mindfulness can enhance healthy romantic relationship functioning (cf. Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004) and suggest that one way it may do so is by facilitating a greater willingness to be present to a partner when challenged in ways that could provoke identity defense. There is some indication that this other-centeredness may extend beyond the romantic context and be reflected in a more general compassionate concern for others. For example, Shapiro, Schwartz, and Bonner (1998) found that, relative to control participants, medical students who received practical training in mindfulness showed increases in empathy over time, despite the fact that postintervention assessments were collected in a high-stress period, during final examinations.

### *Social Exclusion*

Another interpersonal situation that presents significant identity challenges is *social exclusion*. As social creatures, humans have an inherent need to belong (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991) and are highly motivated to avoid social demotions

and exclusions (e.g., Allen & Knight, 2005; Leary, 2004). The perception that one has been rejected, even by strangers, can quickly provoke psychological distress (e.g., Leary, 2004). Identity, as already noted, is strongly influenced by the opinions and reactions of others, and negative evaluative reactions to rejection occur because the individual's sense of self-worth is invested in, or contingent on, validation by others. However, with the capacity to recognize the identity as a construction, events such as rejection that impinge on it may be less likely to be destabilizing because a deeper sense of self is operational that is grounded in awareness (Ryan & Brown, 2003).

Creswell, Eisenberger, and Lieberman (2008) tested aspects of this argument, specifically by examining the proposition that with consciousness more firmly rooted in mindful attention, individuals are less likely to experience distress when excluded by members of a group. In line with our proposition that mindfulness promotes more open, nondefensive processing of challenging events, Creswell et al. also examined whether the more mindful person's greater equanimity in the face of exclusion was due to reduced reactivity to this form of social threat, measured by functional magnetic resonance imaging of neural regions known to be implicated in the experience of social pain and distress.

College students in Creswell et al.'s (2008) study engaged in a ball-tossing video game (i.e., Cyberball), ostensibly with two other student participants situated in nearby functional magnetic resonance imaging scanners. In fact, each participant was interacting with a computer. In the first block of trials, the participant was included in the ball-tossing game by what he or she thought were the other players; then, in a second block of trials, the participant was excluded from the ball tossing. The results showed that mindfulness, assessed with the MAAS upon entry into the study, predicted lower self-reported social distress after the exclusion experience. Mindfulness also predicted reduced activation of the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) during the exclusion task relative to the inclusion task; the dACC is a neural region associated with reports of physical and social pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Analyses also showed that the reduced dACC activation partially mediated, or helped to explain the relation between, mindfulness and lower social distress. These findings provide initial evidence for an association between mindfulness and reduced reactivity to social exclusion distress, and suggest that this association may be explained, in part, through reduced reactivity of the dACC during social exclusion.

The picture painted by Creswell et al.'s (2008) study is consistent with Barnes et al.'s (2007) examination of romantic couple conflict described earlier, in that it suggests that mindfulness predicts a more subdued response to social threat—in this case, apparent rejection by peers—and that this attenuated response is due, in part, to reduced evaluative reactivity to that threat (see also Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007). Furthermore, Creswell et al.'s (2008) study findings appear to support the conceptualization of mindfulness as a receptive, experiential mode of stimulus processing, in contrast to an analytic mode, wherein events and experiences are processed in an abstracted, ruminative fashion (Teasdale, 1999).

### *Worldview Defense*

The social embeddedness of the individual is reflected not only in intimate relationships and peer groups but also in broader social or cultural groups defined by their shared worldviews. These worldviews, reflecting values, ideals, or beliefs about the world and the place of the individual or group in it, provide a sense of shared meaning and order that acts to affirm personal and group identity (e.g., see chap. 3, this volume; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Tajfel (1981) defined *social identity* or *group identity* as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Paralleling romantic relationship conflict, investment in a relational identity—in this case, an ingroup identity—can lead to conflict and antagonism when that identity (“us” and “ours”) is threatened by an outgroup or something representative thereof (“them” and “theirs”). As contemporary world events and the historical record suggest, people will often act as strongly to ward off threats to their social identities as they do to defend their own persons against attack.

As discussed in chapter 3 of this volume, terror management theory (TMT; Solomon et al., 2004) argues that a key trigger for social identity defense is the threat of death. According to TMT, the knowledge of one’s inevitable demise creates an omnipresent potential for anxiety that is managed by affirming or defending cultural worldviews. A common way in which this is manifest is by upholding ingroup worldviews and by derogating outgroup members whose views are counter to those of the ingroup. In so doing, people are enabled to view themselves as valuable members of a permanent reality. Such action affirms the features of the ontological self—in this case, the social self—noted earlier in this chapter, namely, substantiality, independence, and essentialism. From a scientific perspective on the self, however, such affirmation attempts to “turn reality on its head” (Waldron, 2003, p. 147).

If, as we have argued, more mindful people are less invested in identity, will they show less worldview defense, particularly when, as TMT argues, their sense of self is threatened by a confrontation with their own mortality? In a series of four studies, Niemiec, Brown, and Ryan (2006) addressed this question by first assessing mindfulness among American citizens and then asking them to write either about their death (mortality salience condition) or about TV watching (control condition). After a brief delay, they then read a pro-U.S. essay and an anti-U.S. essay purportedly written by two different foreigners. The outcome in these studies was a series of evaluations of the essay authors and their opinions. Across several independent samples, the findings showed that participants with lower MAAS mindfulness scores in the mortality salience condition evidenced worldview defense, as reflected in stronger derogation of the anti-U.S. (outgroup) essay author and higher favoritism toward the pro-U.S. (ingroup) essay author. In contrast, the ratings of participants higher in mindfulness showed no worldview defense. In an effort to explain these findings, Niemiec et al. found that more mindful individuals, when confronting their death, spent more time writing about it and used more death-related

words to describe it, suggesting a greater openness to processing this threatening potentiality. In turn, analyses showed that this more receptive processing of mortality helped to explain the association between mindfulness and lack of worldview defense.

## **Conclusions and Further Considerations**

In this chapter, we have highlighted findings from several studies showing that mindfulness facilitates a capacity to respond less defensively to social threat, manifest in reduced emotional reactivity to interpersonal conflict and peer rejection and a lack of worldview defense in the face of social identity threat. These findings are consistent with the thesis that mindfulness helps to reduce identity investment, or to quiet the ego. The research in this area is still nascent, and more work is needed to examine more thoroughly the relation of mindfulness to identity and its functioning. However, the preliminary findings suggest that mindfulness tempers a primary set of symptoms of identity investment, namely, defensive response.

What are the adaptive implications of mindful responses to social threat? One could argue that in hostile and other dangerous situations, a defensive state of mind, instead of a receptive one, is highly adaptive because it offers protection to the physical organism (Allen & Knight, 2005). It may appear that mindfulness, with its emphasis on receptivity to even threatening events and experience, has adaptive costs. Although this remains an open empirical question, Buddhist scholars and, more recently, clinical psychologists using mindfulness-based therapies (e.g., Hayes, 2002), argue that mindfulness does not eliminate identity but instead contextualizes it, so that its functions can be channeled more flexibly, constructively, and with more choice toward, for example, an engagement of reflectively considered values, goals, and activities that support personal and social well-being. This involves a fundamental change in the place of identity in consciousness and in day-to-day life, because it entails a shift in the locus of personal subjectivity from conceptual representations of the self and others to awareness itself (e.g., Deikman, 1996). Research on the implications of such a shift, although still in its infancy, is promising. Given the harm that identity investment is known to cause in interpersonal and social affairs, such research may offer valuable contributions to enhancing the quality of people's social lives.

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# Transcending Self-Interest

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS  
OF THE QUIET EGO

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