

Reducing Separateness with Presence

How Mindfulness Catalyzes Intergroup Prosociality

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## Abstract

Intergroup prosociality begins with receptive attention. Marked by apparent simplicity, it is easy to overlook the role in attentiveness to others in considering intergroup sensitivity and inclusiveness. This chapter will show how attentive *presence* can have manifold positive consequences in intergroup contexts. Drawing upon the centuries-old practice and recent science of mindfulness, we describe the inherent kindness of mindful presence and highlight psychological research showing how mindfulness can reduce defensive attitudes toward those of other races and nationalities. We then show how even brief mindfulness training can increase prosocial responses toward members of social out-groups. These studies speak to the potential for mindful attention to catalyze prosocial attitudes and actions across social group lines.

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### How Mindfulness Catalyzes Intergroup Prosociality

Ultimately, peace is... about attitudes, about a sense of empathy, about breaking down the divisions that we create for ourselves in our own minds and our hearts that don't exist in any objective reality, but that we carry with us generation after generation. (Obama, 2013)

Throughout history intergroup conflict has had a devastating impact on societies and cultures, contributing to more than 200 million deaths in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone (Cohen & Insko, 2008). At the heart of this issue, perceiving psychological separateness between “us” and “them” is psychological kindling for intergroup neglect, prejudice, discrimination, and full-blown aggressive conflict (Cikara, 2015; Zaki & Cikara, 2016). Social and political movements have inspired popular, scholarly, and scientific interest in ameliorating intergroup tension, and as a means to this end, social psychological approaches converge on identifying and cultivating psychological factors that bolster prosocial attitudes across social and cultural lines (see Batson & Ahmad, 2009 for review). Implicit to the promotion of prosocial attitudes and actions is the quality of attention paid to the person with whom one is interacting. Barrett-Lenard (1981) pointed out that an “empathic attentional set” is necessary for successful intergroup interactions, in which one “opens him- or herself in a deeply responsive way to another person’s feelings” (p. 92).

How does one attend deeply to the other? Despite theoretical perspectives asserting the importance of attention in prosocial attitudes and action (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1970), little social psychological research has examined the role of attentional *quality* in these domains. *Mindfulness* offers particular promise in the study of intergroup prosociality, for several reasons.

First, mindfulness entails a heightened capacity for careful – one could even say, *unconditional* – attention to internal and external stimuli from moment to moment. A growing body of research from the cognitive sciences indicates that gains in sustained attention, executive attention and other indicators of well-functioning attention capacities accrue with mindfulness training (MT; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Slagter et al., 2007; Tang et al., 2007; van den Hurk, Gionni, Gielen, Speckens, & Barendregt, 2010). Second, there is initial indication that such training has positive social, including prosocial consequences (Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & DeSteno 2013). Finally, training in mindful attention may be more transferable to social contexts than other attention training methods (Tang & Posner, 2009). Therefore, mindfulness provides a fitting lens through which to examine the role of attentional variation in intergroup prosociality.

The interpersonal benefits of mindfulness have been highlighted by the religious and philosophical traditions from which the concept and experience is derived, which emphasize the importance of disengaging from the often automatic, self-centered concerns that help to preserve the perceived psychological distance that separates “us” from “them” and thereby inhibit interpersonal sensitivity and meaningful connection with others (e.g., Brown, Berry, & Quaglia, 2016; Leary & Terry, 2012; Trautwien, Schmidt, & Naranjo, 2014). Consistent with this, a recent meta-analysis found a moderate effect size of MT on salutary interpersonal outcomes ( $\bar{r} = 0.44$ ; Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Drawing upon the centuries-old practice and more recent science of mindfulness, we propose in this chapter that the inherent receptivity of mindful attention helps to set the stage for prosociality across social and cultural lines.

In this chapter we discuss two consequences of group membership, namely defensive attitudes and reduced prosocial emotion and action toward out-group members, and then turn to ways in which our and others’ research indicates that mindfulness can attenuate these

psychological states and behaviors. We will close by offer two potential mechanisms by which mindfulness may catalyze intergroup prosociality, namely de-automatization and dis-identification.

### **Mindfulness and Defensive Intergroup Attitudes**

Belonging to a cohesive social group has its benefits, not the least of which that group membership is necessary to one's survival (Brewer & Caporael, 2006). Membership in cooperative groups allows for reciprocal exchange of food and other tangible resources, provides potential mates and protection from threat, and promotes the dissemination of cultural values and knowledge (De Dreu, Balliet, & Halevy, 2014). Furthermore, group membership fosters psychological and social well-being (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although the benefits of group membership are legion, feeling that one belongs to a group is typically accompanied by less willingness to cooperate with and help those who do not belong (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011) and can even foster neglect of, and/or aggression toward social outgroup members (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010).

As social beings, individuals are embedded within the broader worldviews of their social and cultural groups, these worldviews reflecting values, ideals, and beliefs about the world and the role of the individual and social groups within it. Common group identity valorizes in-group members, encourages reciprocal exchange and trust, and provides a source of shared meaning among members of the in-group (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). But conflict and tension arise when this shared meaning is threatened or attacked. Contemporary and historical examples abound of individuals and groups aggressing against, neglecting, or derogating rival groups when they threaten in-group worldviews and social identity.

Contemplative theorists have long emphasized the potential for mindfulness and other meditation practices to bridge perceived gaps between self and other, us and them (e.g., Leary & Terry, 2012; Trautwien, Schmidt, & Naranjo, 2014). In this section we present nascent evidence that mindfulness fosters non-defensive attitudes toward social out-group members in three domains: worldview threat, linguistic intergroup bias, and automatic implicit bias.

### **Worldview Threat**

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT; Pyszczynski et al., 2004), annihilation of the self in death represents both a physical threat and symbolic threat to personal and social identity. Reflecting on one's death typically provokes anxiety, leading to efforts to manage this anxiety by defending social and cultural worldviews – both being symbolic representations of the self. Most commonly, worldviews are defended by favoring in-group and derogating out-group members to maintain a sense of permanence of one's self after certain death. Neimeic et al., (2010) asked whether mindful individuals, who are theorized to be less invested in identity, would show lower worldview defense in response to contemplating death. In a series of studies, those researchers created worldview threats after priming participants with an exercise making their own mortality salient. For example, in one study American citizens wrote either about their death or about watching TV (a control condition), and after a brief delay read scenarios that commonly evoke worldview defense (reading an essay by an anti- or pro-American peer). Compared to those lower in basic dispositional mindfulness, more mindful individuals evidenced less (in fact, almost no) derogation of the anti-American author and little favoritism toward the pro-American author. Similar results were found when considering a racial out-group member and a moral transgressor. Additional studies in the series showed that more mindful individuals did not simply distract from thoughts about death, but were more open to processing the threat,

spending more time writing about their death and using more death-related words. This greater openness to processing mortality mediated the inverse relation between mindfulness and lower worldview defense. Consistent with the hypothesis that mindfulness reduces defensiveness toward out-group members, these studies showed that the tendency to bolster symbolic representations of the self under conditions of mortality salience was dampened.

### **Linguistic Intergroup Bias**

The language that we use to describe others reveals our privately held beliefs and attitudes about them, implicitly transmitting stereotypic and prejudicial attitudes (Maass, 1999). Such beliefs are conveyed through linguistic abstraction that varies from concrete descriptions of others' behaviors ("person A struck person B") to abstract character judgments ("person A is violent"; Semin & Fiedler, 1992). When out-group members engage in positive actions that violate our stereotypic beliefs about them, people commonly make concrete verbal descriptions of those behaviors; on the other hand, abstract character inferences based on group stereotypes are made when explaining negative actions of out-group members (Maass, 1999).

Tincher, Lebois, and Barsalou (2015) asked whether brief MT would dampen stereotypic and prejudicial attitudes, as reflected in attenuated linguistic intergroup bias. Participants were randomized to either brief MT or a control condition that involved absorption in vivid details of personal thoughts. After these exercises participants were shown hand-drawn pictures depicting an individual engaged in a negative or positive behavior (e.g., hitting or helping another person). Participants then chose one of four linguistic descriptions of the behavior ranging in degree of abstraction. For example, if shown a picture of an individual helping another person from the ground, choices ranged from (a) "Person A is picking up the other person" (concrete), (b) "Person A is helping the other person," (c) "Person A is concerned about the other person," (d)

“Person A is considerate” (abstract). Group status was manipulated by asking participants to imagine either their best friend (in-group) or worst enemy (out-group) engaging in these actions while making these judgments. Consistent with prior studies of linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, 1999), it could be expected that an in-group member (best friend) would be more frequently rated abstractly (e.g., “considerate”) in positive contexts, whereas an out-group member (worst enemy) would be more frequently rated concretely (e.g., “picking up the other person”) in positive contexts. The opposite pattern of results could be expected to occur for negative behaviors. The study showed, however, that MT participants evidenced less linguistic intergroup bias, as they chose fewer concrete linguistic descriptions of pictures depicting out-group members engaged in positive behaviors and fewer abstract linguistic descriptions of pictures depicting out-group members engaged in negative behaviors. Thus, brief MT prior to intergroup judgment reduced the tendency to choose language perpetuating stereotypic and prejudiced thinking.

### **Automatic Implicit Bias**

Implicit attitudes are based on automatic associations between two or more constructs in memory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Coming into contact with a representative of a social group for which a stereotype schema is present automatically activates attitudes about them (e.g., Devine, 1989), and these attitudes have a number of often unintended consequences detrimental to intergroup interactions, ranging from discriminatory hiring decisions (Rudman & Glick, 2001), to more frequent shooting of ambiguously threatening out-group members (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002). Growing research interest in the contemplative science community on attenuating implicit bias has sparked systematic study of the effects of mindfulness and other meditation practices on implicit attitudes. Kang, Gray, and Dovidio (2013) demonstrated that



non-Black adults receiving 6-week loving-kindness meditation (LKM) training, relative to those in a loving-kindness discussion group, showed reduced implicit bias against Blacks and the homeless, as measured by the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Stell and Farsides (2015) found that among White participants even brief (10-min) LKM afforded lower automatic activation of, and greater conscious control over implicit racial biases against Black individuals on the IAT. The researchers found that positive emotions toward the out-group mediated the effect of LKM on implicit racial bias reduction.

The meditation training in these studies was multimodal in form, including directing participants in how to be more sensitive toward others, but there is evidence that a mindful state itself reduces implicit bias. Lueke and Gibson (2014) asked whether deploying mindful attention could reduce implicit race and age biases. Participants were randomized to receive a brief (10-min) mindfulness induction or a matched control induction prior to completing the race and age IAT. Results showed that MT decreased implicit race and age bias, presumably because mindfulness weakened automatically activated associations on the IAT.

Together, these studies of worldview defense, explicit linguistic bias, and implicit bias show a consistent pattern of non-defensiveness toward out-group members, and a profile of intergroup interaction that begins with open or receptive presence toward the other. In the next section we turn to evidence showing that mindfulness can also foster kindness toward social out-group members.

### **Mindfulness and Intergroup Prosociality**

When predicaments befall others, humans express an innate and learned capacity to empathize with them and to show them kindness and care (de Waal, 2008). Perhaps in part because seeking and maintaining long-lasting social relationships is a basic psychological need

(Deci & Ryan, 1985), empathy is often expressed unintentionally, and even toward strangers (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Contemporary examples abound, however, of people failing to help others in need. Decety and Chaminade (2003) suggest that before empathic responses can be made a person in need must first be perceived to be like or similar to a prospective helper. Although most people condemn discrimination and endorse egalitarian attitudes, intergroup contexts are frequently marked by an “empathy gap” in which prosociality is often lacking (e.g., Cikara et al., 2011).

As stated earlier, mindfulness has been theorized to help close the psychological distance between self and others (e.g., Trautwein et al., 2014). If mindfulness fosters disengagement from self-centered concerns (Feldman, Greeson, & Senville, 2010) then it may also enhance the perceived similarity between self and others more readily than as compared to states of self-absorption or inattentiveness to automatic attitudes that arise in intergroup interactions. Thus, if prosocial emotion and action are promoted by perceived similarity, mindfulness could be expected to foster prosociality in intergroup contexts.

### **Mindfulness in Intergroup Prosocial Emotion and Action**

Prosocial emotions and actions crucially begin with careful attention to the person in need (Darley & Latané, 1970). Although implicit to theories of prosociality, quality of attention is a largely overlooked determinant of prosocial emotion and action. But in interpersonal contexts attention is a nuanced phenomenon, requiring attention to the present situation so as to notice the person’s predicament and also “tuning in” to one’s own internal somatic and affective responses to that situation (Singer, Critchley, & Preuschoff, 2009). This interoceptive awareness is particularly important in the generation of empathy, as individuals rely on such awareness to simulate the affected person’s mental and emotional state, drawing upon their own prior mental

and emotional experiences of similar circumstances (Gallese & Goldman, 1998). MT has been shown to enhance interoceptive awareness (Bornemann, Herbert, Mehling, & Singer, 2014), and consequently, empathy and helping behavior toward strangers (Berry et al., 2016b; Condon et al., 2013; Lim, Condon, & DeSteno, 2015), who are often shown fewer kindnesses than shown toward “known” others. If, as Desbordes et al. (2015) theorize, mindfulness is characterized by unconditional, equanimous attention, its prosocial benefits should extend to intergroup interactions, and in this section we present nascent research from our lab showing that mindfulness fosters prosocial emotion and action to strangers and other out-group members.

In three experiments by Berry, Brown, and Cairo (2016a) participants were randomized to listen to either a brief (10-minute) audio-recorded MT, a structurally-equivalent attention training, or to receive no-instruction, and then witnessed a person with a dissimilar personality (Study 1) or race (Studies 2-3) being ostracized or excluded in an online ball-tossing game (Cyberball; Williams, Yeager, Cheung, & Choi, 2012). Relative to those in the control conditions, MT participants reported higher empathic concern for the victim (and lower empathic anger toward the perpetrators). MT participants also wrote more comforting emails to the victim and included them more often during a later ‘all play’ Cyberball game. Empathic concern mediated the effect of MT on helping behavior outcomes, suggesting that a state of mindful attention fostered more empathy and subsequently, more helping behavior.

Berry et al. (2016a) extended these findings to *in vivo* social interactions by implementing scenario-based indicators of helping behavior. Self-identifying White, Caucasian, or European American participants were randomized to receive one of the two following scenarios: (1) the experimenter ostensibly accidentally dropped a large stack of informed consent documents on the floor, or (2) another ostensible participant walked into the waiting room on

crutches and leaned uncomfortably against the wall (c.f., Condon et al., 2013). The race of the confederate needing help (White or Black) was also randomized. Thereafter participant completed a series of self-report measures including a commonly used measure of basic dispositional mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and a measure of racial prejudice toward African Americans (Henry & Sears, 2002). Although there were no differences in the frequency of helping toward same race vs. other race confederates in need, more mindful individuals helped more often in both scenarios. Further, while self-reported racial prejudice predicted less helping in the interracial conditions, dispositional mindfulness qualified this relation, such that more mindful individuals helped more frequently regardless their racial attitudes toward African Americans. Together, these studies provide initial support for the positive role of mindful attention in intergroup prosociality.

### **Kind Presence: How Mindfulness May Reduce Separateness**

As these incipient lines of research develop, the question arises as to why mindfulness conduces to less defensiveness and greater prosociality toward out-group members. In this section we suggest that mindful attention can help to override automatic mental processes that foster separateness, and can encourage social responses absent a strong overlay of self-identification, offering greater potential for choiceful action. Through these mechanisms, we suggest, mindfulness is thought to foster kind action toward others, including out-group members, without presupposition as to their traits, intentions, goals, or worldviews.

### **De-automatizing Separateness**

The capacity to be mindful stands in stark contrast to much of our daily experience, in which we operate on automatic pilot without much awareness of what we are doing (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). We easily drift off into mind wandering (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) and

when provoked or stressed, we often act and react automatically (e.g., Kang, Gruber, & Gray, 2013). In states of automaticity, awareness operates in service to automatic thoughts, feelings, desires, and behavior.

Mindfulness, is thought to allow a clear, moment-to-moment glimpse into what one is thinking, feeling, or doing, in which events are “seen” without dominance by conceptual thought (Olendski, 2005). This mindful stance allows one to notice mental processes as they arise, or to notice the psychological effects of those processes on one’s experience and behavior, and then slow, interrupt, change, or override these automatic cognitions, emotions, and behaviors.

Levesque and Brown (2007) demonstrated that for those lower in basic dispositional mindfulness, implicit autonomy orientation was significantly positively associated with day-to-day autonomous motivation; more mindful individuals, however, showed higher day-to-day autonomous motivation regardless of implicit autonomy orientation. These results indicate that among those lower in implicit autonomous orientation, mindfulness tempered the unconscious tendency to associate the self with low volition. These findings are consistent with mindfulness theory in in showing that a predisposition toward this state of mind was associated with less automatized, more choiceful behavior on a day-to-day basis.

More germane to the present exposition, perceiving separateness between “me” and “them” or “us” and “them” can occur automatically. As previously stated, mere exposure to a member of a social category (based on race, sex, political orientation, etc.) activates schemas based on the stereotypic traits, intentions, and behaviors of that out-group (e.g., Devine, 1989), and this categorization process innervates downstream intergroup prejudice, neglect, and conflict (Billig, 1985). These processes, however, can be controlled and/or overridden (Devine & Sharp, 2009). For example, increasing awareness of one’s prejudiced attitudes and behaviors can

attenuate their expression (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003). Thus, heightening awareness to intergroup cognitions, emotions, and interactions via mindful awareness may afford more choiceful responses that are less constrained by automatic intergroup biases.

Further, mindfulness may promote a lessening of stereotypic and prejudicial attitudes, particularly as a consequence of long-term MT. Devine, Forscher, Austin, and Cox (2012) suggest that interventions that aim to reduce intergroup biases typically cultivate awareness of those biases as a first step toward reducing them. In this way, MT could create a disposition in which frequent awareness of one's own stereotypic and prejudiced responses in intergroup interactions serves to reduce them altogether.

### **(Dis)identification: Breaching Interpersonal Separateness**

Self-identification with a social category or group is a necessary first step toward in-group favoritism and intergroup conflict. Tajfel (1981) defines such identification as “the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Brewer (2001) continues: “social identification involves affective and evaluative processes that are above and beyond cognitive classification. The affective significance arises from the felt attachment between the self and the in-group” (p. 21). Only when one incorporates the group into their personal and social identity do intergroup tensions arise. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals are motivated to enhance and maintain self-esteem by achieving positive in-group distinctiveness, the tendency to perceive one's social in-group as *distinct* from and *better* than other out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). Even among individuals assigned to “minimal groups” that are created on an arbitrary basis (in the lab, for example), distinctions are made between “us” and “them” and are especially exaggerated when they favor the in-group (Tajfel, 1978). Favoring

one's in-group(s) promotes positive interactions among in-group members, but can also have detrimental downstream consequences to the harmony of intergroup relations. "Privileging members of our group, by correlation, de-privileges those who do not belong to it" (Ricard, 2013, p. 277). Out-group members are perceived as homogenous, and we often neglect their psychological complexity, relying on cognitive shortcuts about their traits, goals, intentions, and behaviors to inform the social interaction (Park, Judd, & Box, 1990).

Personal and social identity are dynamic constructs that involve identification with particular attributes, roles, group memberships, and worldviews that are consistent with appraisals that one has made over time (Gilbert, 2005). The lay view of identity entails that one maintains a coherent and consistent view of the self that is separate from others (Metzinger, 2003). Interpersonal and intergroup interactions can be viewed as interactions between self-representations of those individuals that are mediated by and filtered through each person's internalized views of self and other (Leary, 2002). When mindful attention is brought to self-representations and other thoughts as they arise, change, and fade away, the ephemeral nature of such processes can be "seen", affording a dis-identification with them (Brown, et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2008).

Through both mechanisms briefly discussed here, namely reduced automaticity and relative self dis-identification, we suggest that mindfulness may lead to less emotional reactivity to identity threats, greater understanding and acceptance of social group differences, and ultimately more harmonious intergroup interactions. In so doing, mindfulness may promote the kinds of altered cognitive, emotional, and overt behavioral responses discussed in this chapter, including lessened stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, lower identification-driven conflict and neglect of out-group members, and higher levels of prosocial action.

### **Conclusions and Further Considerations**

This chapter highlighted findings supporting theory that mindfulness facilitates adaptive intergroup interactions, particularly expressed in lower defensive behavior and increased prosociality across social and cultural lines. The research presented herein is promising, but more well-controlled experimental research that pits MT against active control conditions is required to better understand whether and why mindfulness fosters positive intergroup interactions. Addressing these questions necessitates an examination of the various forms that MT can take. At present it is unclear which forms of training – for example, in open monitoring, focused attention, or loving kindness (compassion) – are most valuable for cultivating intergroup harmony.

What psychological mechanisms drive the positive intergroup consequences of mindfulness? In this chapter we proposed two potential reasons why mindfulness has such effects, namely that this state of mind is comparatively less subject to automatic intergroup biases, and promotes psychological states and behavior marked by less self-identification (i.e., is “hypo-egoic”; Brown & Leary, in press; see Leary, Chapter x, this volume). Other mechanisms are plausible as well; for example, intergroup prosociality could also be supported by the purported emotion regulatory advantage of mindfulness (Arch & Landy, 2015). Social psychological and social neuroscience approaches to empathy suggest that one must regulate their own negative affect to an affected person’s predicament prior to helping them (Decety & Jackson, 2004), and mindfulness may offer emotion regulatory benefits in such circumstances.

All of the research presented here focused on individual-level psychological and behavioral outcomes in intergroup contexts. Researchers ought to be cognizant of the group and societal level antecedents and consequences of mindfulness as well. Interest in the positive



consequences of mindfulness practice for national well-being has reached the political realm (Ryan, 2012).

What are the adaptive implications for mindfulness in intergroup prosociality? We have emphasized the adaptive nature of mindfulness, but might it have adaptive costs to the individual and/or group? For instance, intergroup conflict is often rife with unfair and unjust treatment of individuals for which empathic anger might energize confrontation to cease injustices (Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003). We found that brief MT conducted to lower empathic anger toward perpetrators after witnessing social exclusion and did not predict punishment of perpetrators (Berry et al., 2016b). Another study found that those higher in dispositional mindfulness were significantly less likely to intervene in an intergroup bullying scenario (Berry, Griffin, Garthe, Davis, & Worthington, 2016c). Righteous anger and punishment are only one way to confront injustice, and historical examples abound of individuals using compassionate, non-violent means to halt social injustices. Mindful attention appears to catalyze similar responsiveness that is focused on ameliorating victim suffering, rather than correcting or punishing perpetrators of unfair and unjust acts.

We hope this chapter invites further research to better comprehend the role of mindful attention in intergroup contexts. As this line of inquiry develops it will also be important to understand how to best apply the basic research findings to promote *in vivo* positive intergroup and cross-cultural interactions. While many agree that people should be sensitive to others regardless of their racial, national, and other social group memberships the real challenge is to know it “in one’s bones.” Perhaps, as has been suggested for millennia, we will discover that by looking inside to investigate our own human proclivities, we become kinder and more

compassionate because underneath the surface differences, we recognize the commonality of experience that all people share.

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