2 Assembling mindful bodies

Mindfulness as a universal 'laboratory of practice'

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This chapter explores how mindful bodies are assembled within mindfulness-based therapies. Our objective is to investigate the intersubjective dynamics taking place within mindfulness-based training, especially the interactions between expert-level mindfulness teachers and the attendees of mindfulness courses, who are sometimes also themselves teachers and trainers of mindfulness. We analyse the specific ways in which mindful bodies are assembled by one particularly influential mindfulness teacher during a professional training event. We pay close attention to the sociality of mindful bodies and the group-based practices of mindfulness teaching in action. We focus our analysis upon the 'affective-discursive' practices (Wetherell, 2013) that are used to make bodies mindful. We find that the mind-body of the mindfulness practitioner, along with the space of meditation practice, are put together using diverse and potentially contradictory resources. We argue on the basis of our analysis that it is precisely the sheer multiplicity of the assemblage of mindfulness which makes it so portable, transferable and potent.

There is arguably insufficient attention given to the practical conduct of mindfulness-based therapeutics, within both the mainstream psychological literatures, which engage in measurement and experimentation, and in the humanities and social sciences literatures, which tend to comprise cultural and textual analyses (Arthington, 2016; Barker, 2014; Eklöf, 2017). The study reported in this chapter builds upon the growing ethnographic literature on mindfulness, especially in anthropology, by analysing mindfulness as an assemblage of affective-practices. We will show how the study of mindfulness may, in turn, contribute to much broader transdisciplinary investigations of self-governance, therapeutic culture and religion/secularity (Illouz, 2008; McGee, 2012).

Wetherell (2013) argues that a focus on affective practices allows researchers to study social meaning-making without making sharp divides between bodies, discourse, affects and emotions. 'The concept of affective-practice ... encompasses the movement of signs but it also tries to explain how affect is embodied, is situated and operates psychologically' (Wetherell, 2013:159). This theoretical framework is a good fit for studies of mindfulness, because the practice of mindfulness involves bodily routines where discourse, bodily knowledge and silence are commonly interspersed. In accordance with our focus on affective-practices,

we argue that studies of mindfulness, as well as other related mind-body therapies, would benefit from unpacking the practices actually involved in therapeutic cultures by giving special attention to social action, metaphor and embodiment, materiality and spatiality.

By analysing the affective-discursive practices which make up the assemblage of mindfulness, we show how one particular mindfulness teacher draws upon a variety of conceptual, historical, metaphorical, material and bodily resources to assemble mindfulness. Mindfulness is discursively imagined to be a universal ‘laboratory’ for self-healing. Embedded within this overarching metaphorical framework are practices of visualising, technologising and naturalising mindfulness. We further find that the spatial metaphors of mindfulness, in which the mind-body are ‘seen’ within a ‘laboratory’ of practice, are also subtly challenged by the teacher and some participants, who sacralise the space of mindfulness. We show how the presence of ‘post-secular’ themes in mindfulness training may problematise making sharp divides between psychotherapy, religion and spirituality (Madsen, 2014; Lerner, Salmenniemi et al., and Tiaynen-Qadir, this book).

In the sections that follow, we summarise the historical background of mindfulness and current research informing our study; discuss our methodology and methods; present our analysis; before finally making some concluding remarks.

Assembling mindfulness

Since the late nineteenth century, people of Anglo-American and Nordic countries have adopted Asian mind-body training regimes as therapeutic ways of living with industrial capitalism (Williams, 2014). Along with yoga, Tai Chi and Transcendental Meditation, mindfulness – Buddhist *sati*, insight meditation, or *vipassanā* – illustrates this trend. Emerging out of complex cross-cultural encounters, most notably early twentieth-century British colonial expansion in Southeast Asia and the 1960s countercultural movement, mindfulness has now become a predominant feature of the globalised self-help industry (Nehring et al., 2016; Madsen, 2015).

Humanities scholars have shown how Buddhist disciplines such as mindfulness have been transformed as they move across time and place. Mindfulness has been made compatible with empirical science and turned into a secular psychological therapy for the purpose of self-healing (McMahan, 2008; Sharf, 1995). Many clinical psychologists, medics and neuroscientists now suggest mindfulness, when applied in standardised eight-week courses of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) can be effective for the relief of chronic pain, stress, anxiety and depression.

The mass expansion of mindfulness provision in the past twenty years, particularly in the United States, has led some commentators to describe a ‘mindfulness movement’ (Wilson, 2014). Interest in mindfulness has grown markedly during times of rapid socio-economic and technological change and political uncertainty.

Today, mindfulness is being implemented across the UK at an astonishing rate, within an ever-expanding array of sectors and for a multitude of purposes. While predominantly applied as MBCT (Segal et al., 2013) for the treatment of

depression, in recent years mindfulness has moved out of the clinic and into the public sphere. As well as the National Health Service (NHS) mindfulness can now also be found in the Westminster, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments and parliaments; schools, colleges and universities; private, public and third-sector workplaces; and even smartphone ‘apps’. Mindfulness is being employed ever more readily, as a way to ensure national well-being, happiness and ‘flourishing’ (Davies, 2015); productivity, performance and efficiency (Cederström & Spicer, 2015); and sustainability, creativity and activism (Rowe, 2016). Mindfulness has become professionalised and institutionalised in the UK to such an extent that this nation may represent the vanguard of mindfulness practice globally.

To date, academic and popular debate on mindfulness has been characterised by polemics, starkly polarised between proponents and critics of mindfulness. Advocates promote mindfulness as a panacea for world peace (Tan, 2012), while critics expose ‘McMindfulness’ as a corporate capitalist bandwagon (Purser & Loy, 2013; Purser, 2019).

On the one hand, of the almost 3,000 psychology and neuroscience articles published since 2010, the overwhelming majority present positive evaluations of mindfulness as being an effective therapeutic tool (Valerio, 2016). MBCT has been recommended by the National Institute for Clinical and Health Excellence and has been made available on the UK NHS for the treatment of relapsing depression since 2004. The evidence-base did not initially result in the ‘roll-out’ of provision in the UK, so in 2014, a Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) was established. Mindfulness was taught to 130 parliamentarians and 220 Westminster government staff, aiming to build on the momentum of the ‘grass-roots’ mindfulness community, and lobby politicians to roll-out mindfulness *en masse* across diverse civil society sectors of health, education, workplace and criminal justice. The authors of the 2015 MAPPG report seek to turn the UK into a ‘Mindful Nation’ (MAPPG, 2015; see also Cook, 2016).

On the other hand, the somewhat evangelical promotion of mindfulness as a universal *panacea* has given way to a backlash, with critics arguing mindfulness has been ‘over-sold’ (Brazier, 2013). Mindfulness, as the latest incarnation of popular Western Buddhism, is arguably becoming established as ‘the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism’, its meditative ‘awareness’ stance being ‘the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity’ (Žižek, 2001: 12–13). Asian religious traditions are framed psychologically as ‘spiritualities’ and meditative practices are commodified for consumers, contradicting their socially radical origins (Carrette & King, 2005). Critics suggest mindfulness is being presented as a neoliberal ‘self-technology’ which medicalises, psychologises and individualises well-being and suffering as being the sole responsibilities of the autonomous individual (Arthington, 2016; Purser, 2019). This critique of mindfulness mirrors the canonical theoretical critique of therapeutic culture, made since the 1960s, as illustrating a widespread cultural decline (see Salmenniemi et al. in this book).

Yet, it has also been suggested, based on recent qualitative research, that mindfulness may pose a challenge to the ideal of self-contained individualism, thereby exposing the limits of neoliberalism (Carvalho, 2014; Cook, 2016; Mamberg & Bassarear, 2015). While mindfulness teachers may present mindfulness as merely a secular ‘technique’ of self-improvement, they may also present mindfulness as a spiritual or sacred practice and encourage self-transcendence among their students. Recent ethnographic and discourse analytic research on mindfulness has investigated the ethico-moral and embodied-discursive ways in which mindfulness teachers and students practically constitute and construct meanings of mindfulness in practice. They demonstrate how both mindfulness, and the self-identities of mindfulness teachers, are socially produced in complex and contradictory ways, which are contextually specific (Arat, 2017; Drage, 2018a, 2018b; Stanley & Longden, 2016; Vogel, 2017; Wheeler, 2017). So, rather than assuming *a priori* that mindfulness automatically represents a de-politicising and individualising practice of self-governance, we can instead ask what kinds of social and cultural worlds are being imagined through movements towards mindfulness (Illouz, 2008; Thomson, 2006). We can be mindful of the cultural, ethical and political contexts and consequences of mindfulness, understood as a social, as well as a psychological, phenomenon (Kirmayer, 2015; Purser, Forbes & Burke, 2016; Stanley, Purser & Singh, 2018).

Mindfulness is commonly framed as an internal psychological state or trait and accompanied by a universalising rhetoric. Teachers and psychologists often describe mindfulness as a basic human capacity, similar to capacities for attention and consciousness, shared by all people, and as being a universally applicable therapeutic intervention. The creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre and MBSR programme Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) provides an operational definition of mindfulness as a conscious awareness that arises when we ‘pay attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally’ (ibid.: 4). While mindfulness is often presented as a merely secular therapeutic technique, it is also often suggested to be a spiritual or sacred practice, or indeed a ‘universal dharma’ being skillfully taught in secular settings (‘dharma’ is sometimes translated as ‘Buddhist teachings’, or the ‘truths’ taught by the Buddha). Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) argue that mindfulness-based interventions such as MBSR and MBCT are ‘Dharma-based portals’ (ibid.: 12) which contain a ‘universal dharma’ taught in secular settings (Kabat-Zinn, 2011: 301). Kabat-Zinn (2017) has recently described MBSR as a ‘skillful means’ of mainstreaming and making available to course participants the ‘universal essence of dharma’ (ibid.: 1130), which is implicitly (rather than explicitly) transmitted to them through the embodiment and ‘authentic presence’ (ibid.: 1134; endnote 15) of the mindfulness teacher. Mindfulness is often presented as a universal capacity – sometimes suggested to be equivalent to consciousness, awareness and attention – in both its secularised and sacralised manifestations. The notion that ‘the mind’ is universal, as well as the idea of mindful awareness itself being potentially curative and liberative, have historical precedents in psychology, medicine and Buddhism, as well as in the counter-cultural turn to spirituality, suggestively illustrated by

The Doors in their song ‘Universal Mind’ (1970): ‘I was doin’ time in the universal mind, I was feelin’ fine, I was turnin’ keys, I was settin’ people free, I was doin’ alright, ... I’m the freedom man’.

A situated perspective for researching therapeutic cultures suggests mindfulness might not be the same thing in different settings (for example, secular or religious). Meanings of mindfulness multiply across different environments, and vary between cultures, such as between the UK, Nordic region and Germany. We find that the place of mindfulness in healthcare, for example, differs greatly between the US, UK, Danish, Swedish and Finnish contexts (Hickey, 2010, Kortelainen et al., 2017; Plank, 2010). We therefore need to pay careful attention to specific versions of ‘mindfulness’, rather than assuming a coherent totality prior to empirical investigation. We should instead study the specific spaces and places through which mindfulness is made manifest and lived.

Mindfulness, metaphor and assemblage

To practice mindfulness, people must learn how to ‘be mindful’, and it is how mindfulness is practically realised through concrete teaching and training encounters that we are interested in examining. To recognise an inner state, practice or event as illustrating ‘mindfulness’ (or otherwise), there must be public criteria which make it recognisable as ‘mindfulness’ (Wittgenstein, 1958). In order to ‘be mindful’, people must (among other things) learn how to use a conceptual vocabulary of mindfulness, which along with much of our language for ‘inner’ psychological life, is pervasively metaphorical (Danziger, 1997; Marnberg & Bassarear, 2015; Varra, Drossel & Hayes, 2009). Yet there have been few studies of the metaphorical construction of mindfulness.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe a metaphor as involving one conceptual domain being chosen to refer to another conceptual domain. According to metaphor theories, metaphors are ways to conceptualise and modify human experience, and hence they can influence how a practitioner of mindfulness recognises, experiences and interprets mindfulness. Ricœur (1991), one of the developers of modern metaphor theory, suggests that contradictions on the level of ordinary use of language are a site where human beings can change their interpretations of objects, since such contradictions are semantically ambiguous and leave the meaning unresolved. Such metaphors can reflect cultural assumptions that mindfulness teachers articulate, as well as ideals of body and mind that are carried over from the history of psychology. As such, in the metaphors employed in MBCT, as we shall explore here, the conceptual domain may be borrowed from various cultural, social or psychological spheres. Even before this choice is made, before the metaphor is imbued with detailed content, the idea of what constitutes mindfulness becomes mixed with cultural images and other creative ways of imagining what meditation involves. Old conceptual connections can be suspended and new ones that attempt to capture how our minds and bodies actually experience mindfulness can be created (Kortelainen, 2013: 158). In addition, we suggest through our analysis that metaphors and especially particular

networks of bodily metaphor that are used within mindfulness training discourse could potentially mould and transform the corporeal experience of participants in mindfulness training courses.

In turn, such ideas about metaphor can be applied to the concept of ‘assemblage’, which is itself metaphorical. The verb ‘assemble’ suggests practices of putting together, making, constructing or building. To create an assemblage may involve arranging, laying out or putting together (Wetherell, 2013). Or, alternatively, we might speak of practices of ‘composing’ political and economic worlds (Higgins & Lerner, 2017). In making bodies mindful, we suggest, practitioners of mindfulness pull together diverse resources, producing themselves and the space of mindfulness practice, to create a recognisable whole. We may also find occasions where the forms of order created through assembling are momentarily broken and we can study such breaks in the flow of meaning-making.

A day of mindfulness practice

The material which forms the primary basis of our analysis is a five-hour audiovisual recording of ‘A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue’ (DoP) taught by Mark Williams, which took place in the middle of the international Mindfulness in Society (2015) conference organised by the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice (CMRP) (School of Psychology, Bangor University, Wales). Mark Williams is a Professor of Clinical Psychology, founder of the CMRP and the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (Oxford University), and co-founder of MBCT. The CMRP conference was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Chester, England, a corporate-style hotel that hosts academic and business conferences, as well as hosting a series of other CMRP conferences. A pharmaceutical conference had just been held prior to this mindfulness conference. The DoP took place in the hotel’s ‘Kings Suite’ – a large ballroom with rows of chairs, two screens for projecting PowerPoint presentations and a disco ball on the ceiling (see Figure 2.1). The video recording of the DoP was downloaded from the publically available CMRP website for the cost of £35. As a source of mindfulness instruction in the early twenty-first century, the internet provides a way for people to learn mindfulness through computer screens, smartphones, tablets or wearable devices (see, Bergroth and Helén, Freigang in this book). Our analysis points to this broader milieu of therapeutic self-tracking and how mindfulness teachers and trainers may themselves receive expert mindfulness instruction online (Eklöf, 2017).

While being a professional practitioner conference in a corporate hotel conference centre, the DoP also resembles a retreat taking place within a secular setting. The event displays hybrid themes of conference/retreat (Tresch, 2011). The social organisation of the DoP broadly mirrors a Buddhist silent retreat in the insight meditation or *vipassanā* traditions (Pagis, 2009). The teacher sits at the front, sometimes on a raised platform, facing a group of students sitting in rows on chairs, cushions or stools. (The spatial arrangement of Zen Buddhist retreats is often quite different, Preston, 1998.) Williams wore a formal, white dress shirt and black trousers, with a pen in his top pocket and a lapel microphone; he also

sat on a meditation bench, on a mat, on a podium raised above the audience of mostly seated practitioners. Bathed in a bright white light, with large bunches of flowers on either side, routinely chiming bells, Williams came across through his physical presence and teaching discourse as simultaneously a professional scientist, evidence-based therapist, paternalistic ‘father figure’ and a kind of religious priest, spiritual guru or healer.

For around three-quarters of the time, attendees are instructed how to ‘look within’ their mind-bodies, alternately sitting in silence with their eyes closed (or downcast), or engaging in walking meditation. For the remainder of the time, they are invited by Williams to ‘share’ together in pairs their ‘experience’ of practising mindfulness, before discussing these experiences in front of the whole group. ‘Sharing experiences’ of meditation in group settings is a remarkable feature of mindfulness courses, which distinguishes them from Buddhist retreats, many of which are held in silence. The practice of public group confession, which makes up the ‘dialogue’ and ‘inquiry’ periods of mindfulness courses, is perhaps likely to have been inherited from Christian religious groups, who influenced the development of confession in lay psychotherapy in the early twentieth century (Falby, 2003).

As well as analysing the video of the DoP, we also selectively present analysis of the popular self-help title *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (Williams & Penman, 2011). This book presents a modified version of the MBCT programme, contains an accompanying CD of guided meditations and informs the teaching of mindfulness in the Westminster UK government, the NHS, as well as school-based mindfulness programmes. As such, this book deserves careful and close scrutiny, but has yet to be the focus of empirical investigation.

We conduct a philosophically and historically informed conceptual analysis of mindfulness-based therapeutics in action, synthesising metaphor theory and discourse analysis. Our aim is to analyse materials that are produced largely without the intervention of researchers. We are interested in what happens in mindfulness training and practice. Our study is inspired by studies of discourse and interaction, as well as ethnography, which attempt to retrospectively study life as it is lived, rather than relying upon experiments, questionnaires or interviews. Our analysis draws on a number of other resources, which befits the cross-sectional fluidity of our topic of study, including sociological studies of attention, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, Foucault-inspired post-structuralism, body phenomenology, rhetorical and discursive psychology (for further detail, see Stanley & Crane, 2016).

We take the experiential and agentic aspects of mindfulness as an embodied practice seriously and therefore have focussed this analysis upon affective-discursive practices. While analysing the affective-discursive practices which ‘make up’ mindfulness, we became particularly interested in the metaphorical vocabularies employed by mindfulness teachers and their students, and the ways in which these vocabularies are practically taken up, or resisted, during the ongoing flow of mindfulness training.

Our analytic sensitivity has been cultivated through our personal histories of practice and teaching of mindfulness, meditation and related contemplative,

Figure 2.1 Mark Williams (MW) teaching ‘A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue’ (DoP).

movement and body-based practices. While our study is not an ethnographic one, we share an ethnographic sensibility and interest in the social and phenomenological aspects of the lived experience of mindfulness meditation, while at the same time bringing analytic attention to reports of ‘experience’ as forms of social action. The first author attended the DoP as a practitioner-researcher and he is pictured sitting in the audience to the top right of Figure 2.1. Our ‘insider-outsider’ position, or position as ‘sympathetic-critics’, is common in the broader field of studies of mindfulness and research on related complementary and alternative therapies.

‘So the Seeing was the Release’: visualising mindfulness

We are interested in how mindfulness is presented and articulated through discourse practices. In this and the following sections, we analyse how mindfulness is spatialised as a ‘laboratory of practice’ and visualised as ‘seeing’ the mind-body; how the person is technologised as an information processing machine; and naturalised as being subject to weather patterns and gravity. Together, such hybrid and potentially contradictory affective-discursive practices contribute to the universalising and standardising of mindfulness meditation practice. However, this secularising of mindfulness does not go unchallenged. We show how some participants subtly resist the idea of mindfulness as like a ‘laboratory’ by sacralising the space of mindfulness practice.

The parallel made previously between the social situation of mindfulness training and the Buddhist ‘insight’ meditation tradition of retreat is additionally

emphasised through the repeated use of the metaphor of mindfulness as involving an inward ‘gaze’. The optic metaphor of mind, such as in the notion of a ‘mind’s eye’, is commonly found in modern Buddhist literature, as well as being the object of much critical debate in philosophy of mind, psychology and cognitive science (Clegg, 2013; Rorty, 1979; Zerubavel, 1997). The metaphor is nicely illustrated by Nyanaponika Thera (1954) in *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* when he writes that:

Western humanity, in particular, will have to learn from the East to keep the mind longer and more frequently in a receptive, but keenly observing state – a mental attitude which is cultivated by the scientist and the research worker, but should increasingly become common property. This attitude of Bare Attention will, by persistent practice, prove to be a rich source of knowledge and inspiration. (p. 36)

Examples of optic metaphors taken from Mark Williams’ teaching discourse on the DoP, which illustrate how the mind is ‘seen’, include: ‘the ability to see, the mind’; ‘important observation’; ‘to look to see if unpleasantness comes up ... what is there to be held (.) what is offering itself up to us to be gazed at’; ‘just observing the breath and somehow being drawn in to notice its quality in some way’; ‘so you were able to see more clearly “ah this is my inner critic” ... so the seeing was the release’. It is assumed in some modern Buddhist literature, as well as in certain psychological studies of consciousness, that the mind can ‘watch’ or ‘observe’ its own workings and functions (Varela & Shear, 1999; for a critique of this assumption from an enactivist cognitive science perspective, see Thompson, 2017).

The optic metaphor of mindfulness goes hand-in-hand with imagining the DoP, and mindfulness meditation practice itself, as a scientific ‘laboratory’. The person learning to be mindful ‘observes’ their mind-body within the ‘laboratory’ of their meditation practice. By ‘seeing’ patterns of mind and body, practitioners of mindfulness potentially release themselves from cycles of ‘suffering’. Williams comes across as a kind of scientist-therapist, who teaches people how to ‘heal’ themselves by taking notice of what is happening in each moment. The quality of this attention, which is described as an ‘instrument’ in need of training, is considered to be part of every human being. The act of paying attention itself is considered to be similar to the measuring qualities of an instrument, although there is sometimes ambiguity about whether this is a scientific or musical instrument. Williams equates mindfulness with ‘tuning the instrument of our practice’, ‘discovery’ and noticing the ‘quality of each breath’. This way of describing meditation as a laboratory, and mindfulness as similar to scientific observation, is common within discourses of ‘scientific Buddhism’, well illustrated in the mid-twentieth century book *An Experiment in Mindfulness* (Shattuck, 1958; see also Lopez, 2012).

An interesting feature of the training is how the optic metaphor of ‘the mind’ relates to ‘the body’. Attention to bodily experience is emphasised in MBCT,

unlike in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), where the focus is changing patterns of thinking. Yet, there is some ambiguity in MBCT discourse about whether the attention is more in ‘the mind’ of the practitioner, or if it is part of a more holistic entity called the ‘mind-body’ (for example). An arguably more nuanced description of bodily knowledge, as found for example in phenomenology, or even wider cognitive science (‘embodied cognition’, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991) is rarely evident in MBCT, even though Williams might be aware of theories which speak of the ‘mind-body’ as a ‘joined’ or even ‘extended’ process.

‘Just like a computer’: technologising mindfulness

Mindfulness is often promoted as a way for people to regain control and agency, making ‘choices’, in the face of increasing automation, thus reclaiming their humanity within an expanding ‘digital capitalism’ (King, 2016). At the same time, mindfulness itself is often explained using metaphors taken from science and technology. We found that technoscientific metaphors are frequently used in the popular book *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (Williams & Penman, 2011). Mindfulness, and the meditating person, are described using technoscientific and communicational terms, such as microphone, radio, radar, tuning, cinema, amplifier and barometer. In particular, mindfulness is a way of releasing people from what psychologists call ‘automatic pilot’. For example, Williams and Penman (2011) use a simile to compare the mind of the person reading their book to a multi-tasking computer, which may ‘crash’ due to being on ‘autopilot’. As is standard in popular self-help, they address the reader personally and directly (‘you’), using a somewhat dramatic example.

Very soon the autopilot can become overloaded with too many thoughts, memories, anxieties and tasks – just like a computer with too many windows left open. Your mind slows down. You may become exhausted, anxious, frantic and chronically dissatisfied with life. And again, just like a computer, you may freeze – or even crash. (ibid.: 86)

Many of the descriptions of mindfulness practice involve a distinctly disembodied language of computation and information processing, such as ‘autopilot’, ‘mode’, ‘system’ and ‘feedback’ which are common to cognitive psychology and cybernetics. Mindfulness is framed, for example, as a way to help people notice when they are in a ‘doing mode’ of mind, such as automatically reacting to experiences. Mindfulness is claimed to help people to ‘switch’ into a ‘being mode’ of mind, in which they gently notice and respond kindly to what is happening.

The ‘being mode’ of mindfulness is commonly considered to be in opposition to ‘mind wandering’ (Morrison et al., 2019; Mrazek et al., 2013). But the conference programme (see Figure 2.2) illustrates some of the conceptual and moral complexity in narrating ‘mind wandering’ within the context of a mindfulness training event. By writing ‘we need mind-wandering in our practice’ Williams

Figure 2.2 'A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue' conference programme.

implicitly defends against the idea that mindfulness is incompatible with mind wandering. Mindfulness without mind wandering is considered to be similar to a 'gym' without 'equipment'.

'The gym' is first used as a simile for the space of 'practice', before Williams employs a metaphor of mindfulness training as a 'laboratory of practice'. This 'laboratory' is simultaneously imagined as both scientific and therapeutic. The person 'awakens' inside the laboratory of practice, 'turning towards' mind

wandering and thereby witnessing the ‘cascade of secondary reactions’. While not explicitly describing mindfulness practice as a ‘laboratory’ during the DoP itself, Williams nevertheless routinely describes mindfulness using keywords from this metaphorical thesaurus (seeing, discovery, observation). During the DoP, Williams suggests ‘testing this out with experiments’ on the ‘workbench’ of the mind. Mindfulness practice is presented primarily as a scientific experiment with therapeutic effects, rather than as a religious or spiritual enterprise.

When functioning together, the use of optic and technoscientific metaphors may be an attempt by mindfulness teachers to universalise and standardise mind and body. This is similar to the attempts by early psychologists, who were ‘observers’ of their own experiences, to train their inwardly directed attentions through introspection, thus turning themselves into reliable scientific instruments (Coon, 1993). ‘Objective’ ways to collect data became typical of the mid-twentieth century psychology of behaviourism, although ‘behaviour’ referred to physical movement, observed from the outside. The body was construed physically through a mechanical and sterile objectivity (Stam, 1998). This served the science of the time in producing measurable knowledge of a human organism, understood as a machine. The body as envisaged by behaviourism is not a fluid, processual, unsure or flowing body. The potential lack of nuance of behaviourist language for describing the human body has been called into question in, for example, affect theory (Blackman, 2012). We are similarly using the concept of affective-practice to analyse and subtly problematise some of the assumptions made in the discourse of expert mindfulness training.

The mechanical mindset of behaviourism still haunts the account of mindfulness within MBCT, and Williams’ standpoint perhaps shows some influence of the early psychology of introspection too (see above). Williams also builds upon these influences with cognitive and experiential – humanistic and phenomenological – forms of understanding through his emphasis on the importance of ‘sharing’ subjective experience in pairs and with the larger group. In the following section we will show how Williams also applies naturalistic and organic metaphors, when advising how people should pay attention to the present moment.

‘Ah, Gravity’: naturalising mindfulness

The use of technoscientific metaphors is balanced with natural and organic ways of describing mindful (and unmindful) bodies (cloud, river, stream, waterfall, avalanche, garden, tree, seeds, spider’s web). Naturalistic imagery such as landscapes, beaches and deserts are commonly found in the popular representation of mindfulness and Buddhist meditation, for example, on the front cover of the *TIME* magazine edition on ‘The Mindfulness Revolution’ (Mitchell, 2014). In the following example, Williams uses a metaphor of ‘weather’ as a way of describing the emotional experience of a ‘bad mood’. By using this metaphor, he suggests practitioners’ experience resembles impersonal forces of nature, which are not subject to their direct influence and control.

Extract 1: Weather Pattern

Mark Williams (MW)	You've done what exactly what you have to do which is actually just notice the sense of the feeling tone and I think this sense of the overall? Weather pattern? And then little micro-climates within it ... yeah? That can just some- and sometimes the overall weather pattern's very stormy and then the- the interesting thing is to discover is the micro-climate still stormy or are there some things which are really curious because in the midst of all this thing my bad mood for example I'm- 'oh that was a moment of pleasantness' 'well that can't be right' (laughs)
Group	(laughter)
MW	So it's just a sense of discovery, of what's of what's here and er I- you know I love the equation thing but I think I- you came back to just say 'okay so what actually is here now'

Williams' use of the metaphor 'weather pattern' involves a management of agency. While he suggests the mindful person is not solely responsible for their 'bad mood', which may change like the weather, they can nevertheless decide to 'observe' this weather (see also Williams and Penman, 2011: 87). The practice of mindfulness is equated with the act of 'discovery'. A mindfulness practitioner is like a naturalist conducting a field observation. This is a subtly different style of observation, and positioning of the observer, to the laboratory experimentation discussed earlier. Patterns of 'mood' resemble weather patterns and the job of the mindfulness practitioner is to neutrally 'notice' their distinctive nuances and changing character. Williams does not explicitly say 'weather pattern' is a metaphor, implying this represents real experience. The wild and lively mind-body of the practitioner is naturalised as an impersonal force. This is similarly illustrated by Kabat-Zinn (1994) who remarks: 'You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf'.

In the following extract, Williams uses 'gravity' as a simile, managing accountability for feelings of resentment and anger, and normalising the 'egos' of mindfulness teachers.

Extract 2: Gravity

MW	The ability to see, the mind, especially when it goes off on one when we feel resentment or, angry and we realise that what's happened is somebody has affronted us in some way or you know wid- 'p-people haven't treated us with respect' you know 'that bus driver spoke badly to me' and 'don't they know who I am?' you know 'I've got a senior citizen bus pass'
Group	(laughter)
MW	er so 'I have rights on this bus' you know this sort've thing where the ego gets involved, and and then we can feel really bad cos we're a mindfulness teacher we shouldn't be like this my God, an- an- see if it's possible to see the ego and all of its works as like gravity it's it's just a force of nature and we have to take it into account like we have to take gravity into account and we can use it for things but it's always there (turns to group) we're not gonna get rid of our egos sorry

- Group (laughter)
 MW we're not gonna get rid of our egos so we have to learn to live with them live alongside them just as you say learn to respect to treat them with gra- and see it as gravity so that next time you get angry you can sort've say to yourself- 'ah gravity'
- Group (laughter)
 MW 'there it goes, gravity' yeah 'gravity' just a force yeah

By 'taking the ego into account', 'like gravity', Williams encourages mindfulness teachers to conduct their own natural science-like observations and experiments in everyday life situations. He normalises the experience of feeling resentful and angry at being affronted by a bus driver, employing a personal story, thereby humanising himself as a teacher. 'Seeing' the mind is prescribed as a morally and therapeutically efficacious course of action, which may be in conflict with an internalised stereotype of a mindfulness teacher who 'shouldn't be like this my God'. We have to learn to live with 'ego' in mindfulness training, a similar point to 'needing' mind wandering. Seeing the ego as being like gravity, just a force of nature, involves naturalising the self and emotions. Williams attempts to bring an objective and neutral model of the body as a natural organism into the participants' self-observation. Images of gravity, along with weather patterns, might become part of practitioners' subjective meditative experience. After all, the act of *seeing* the mind-body as a powerful force of nature, and not always subject to individual control, is itself implied to be therapeutic. Mindfulness practitioners are being trained to imagine themselves as a natural scientist who heals herself through self-observation.

Describing 'mood' and 'ego' as natural phenomena does not necessarily contradict the technoscientific language discussed previously. Both metaphors involve imagining an objective realm, commonly shared by all people, which can potentially be observed (or even measured) experientially through a kind of 'inner empiricism'. Naturalising mindfulness is therefore closely intertwined with technologising mindfulness, as both practices are potentially involved in making mindfulness universal and its training standardised. While Williams introduces his audience to multiple descriptions of what happens during mindfulness practice, the quality of paying attention is assumed to be fundamentally the same, or at least very similar, among different people. By using natural science rhetoric, Williams renders the observational capacity of mindfulness as compatible with empirical science, thus making mindfulness appear trustworthy and reliable. If mindfulness practice is equivalent, or similar, to conducting a natural scientific observation or experiment, then it can produce observable, and potentially replicable, objective results.

'Like a doorway opening': sacralising mindfulness

So far, we have discussed constructions of mindfulness which are decidedly secular-sounding. Mindfulness training involves taking a scientific approach, such as a naturalistic observation, and/or a kind of laboratory experimentation. Ocular metaphors of 'seeing' the mind reinforce the orientation of a scientist who, by

watching their experience, heals themselves. Yet, in addition to this secularising of mindfulness, the dialogue between Williams and the attendees of the DoP goes further. This is evident in the sharing of experiences that extend beyond breathing which subtly challenges a sole emphasis in meditation on attending to physical sensations of the body alone.

Extract 3: Doorway (I)

Participant 2	It really struck me in that moment that the ah opening to the quality of the breath is like a doorway into the immediacy of of this whole experience erm so it's not just the quality of the breath ... you know that instruction it's like a kind of a doorway inta- erm opening to this as opposed to being caught in reflection er erm yeah
MW	What is it a can you say more about the that shift, it sounds like a really interesting shift between erm ... just observing the breath and somehow being drawn into notice its quality in some way? What is it about that that draws you in do you think

This participant subtly challenges what we have described above as a technoscientific interpretative frame, that is, mindfulness as a purely objective scientific pursuit. Participant 2 uses a simile – ‘it’s like a kind of a doorway’ – and suggests that the instruction of ‘opening’ to the quality of the breath is a potential ‘doorway’ to ‘this’. The use of the indexical ‘this’ points to this as yet unnamed experience. Later on, following the sequence reported in this extract, Participant 2 further describes, with some apparent difficulty, where the doorway opens onto: ‘this experience as it is’; ‘rich vividness of this’; ‘vital immediacy’; ‘the richness of this’. However, Williams keeps returning to the feeling of the breath as the focus of discussion, as he does in Extract 3, proceeding to make a contrast between ‘ideas’ and ‘life’ and how practitioners can inadvertently ‘put the breath on automatic ... pilot’. Williams later encourages paying attention ‘inside the texture of the breath’ in ‘this moment’.

While in one sense, people who practice mindfulness have authority over their own so-called ‘first-person’ experience, and ‘share’ this during spoken dialogue, in another sense the elicited confessions of ‘experience’ of meditation are also monitored and regulated by external authorities, such as mindfulness teachers, spiritual gurus and contemplative scientists (Pagis, 2009; Tresch, 2011). We find that mindfulness teachers tend to balance their position as being liberal, ‘open-minded’, ‘neutral’ and ‘permissive’ figures while also exerting (sometimes very subtly) the strict regulation, control and disciplined prescription of authority figures (Crane et al., 2015; Stanley & Longden, 2016). This balancing act, which involves the negotiation of contrary themes of equality and expertise, can be described as a ‘permissive prescription’ (cf. Billig et al., 1988; see also Peteri in this book). By redirecting the topic of dialogue back to the feeling of breathing, Williams displays a subtle resistance to the participants’ attempt to discuss the ‘doorway’ opened through the instruction, as well as what might be beyond the doorway.

Soon after this sequence of interaction, however, Williams takes up an invitation from another participant to explore the ‘doorway opening’.

Extract 4: Doorway (II)

Participant 3	So as you're saying that erm sometimes one can be quite distant an an we talk about compassion for ourselves and so on but actually actually having that emotional response to the feeling of the breath or or being with it or that that doorway opening which is a which is an emotion that's actually quite difficult to talk about?
MW	mmm (nods head) mmm it's difficult to talk about yeah that's what wonderful about it
Group	(some 'mmm' acknowledgements)
MW	We come to the edge of words and are called into silence the and and intimacy with what is most most real for us and it's like we suddenly realise that we don't need more information we need- we're being called to yield to what we already know in our hearts whereas when we sit we're often thinkin' 'with just a bit more information I'll be the perfect meditator'
Group	(laughter)
MW	erm rather than in those moments of intimacy yielding to what we already know erm when we've reached the edge of words or inner language hmm thank you

In these moments of dialogue, the discursive aspects of practice are (somewhat paradoxically) de-emphasised, and instead emphasis is given to 'doorways' to experiences, which seemingly cannot be easily captured or expressed through language alone. Stillness, silence and the arising of what might be termed 'religious' or 'spiritual' experiences may make their discursive inscription a challenge, perhaps necessarily so. Indeed, difficulty 'talking about' certain experiences, such as emotions and doorways, can attest to the limits of language. Williams does not say who, or what – if anyone – is 'calling' us into silence in these moments. He does not use words such as religious or spiritual or sacred (Williams and Penman, 2011 do acknowledge 'heart' and 'soul'). Yet, he describes 'moments of intimacy', 'yielding' to 'what we already know in our hearts'.

Recent research on mindfulness has suggested, rather than representing distinctly secular, religious or spiritual discourse alone, that some varieties of mindfulness teaching are instead better captured by the idea of 'post-secularity', in which secular spaces are sacralised and enchanted (Arat, 2017; McMahan, 2012). This idea is supported by our materials. There is little explicit discussion of religion or spirituality during the DoP, and yet the discourse is not simply secular. The discussion of 'doorways' and being 'called into silence' could be interpreted as deriving from discourses of religion, such as contemplative strands of Christianity, or forms of spirituality in which ineffable psychological and emotional 'experience' is foregrounded (Drage, 2018a, 2018b; James, 1902).

Williams and Participant 3 collaboratively produce an account in which the space of mindfulness is sacralised and imagined to be a kind of 'post-secular' laboratory, which potentially transcends words and physical materiality. Williams appears to undermine, or at least put a limit on, the usefulness of the central metaphor of cognitive science – information – when he says 'we don't need more

information'. He suggests that mindfulness practice itself, especially its silent dimensions, may provide a different – equivalent or superior – form of knowledge to science. A wordless knowledge.

The somehow 'difficult' or 'beautiful' experiences encountered among the mindfulness practitioners, as seen in breathing as a 'doorway' to some other understanding, along with much more profoundly disturbing experiences, are claimed to be more commonplace than popular and professional discourse about mindfulness courses might imply (Ellis, 1984; Farias et al., 2016: 1012; Shapiro, 1992). Lindahl and others have pointed out that such experiences are seldom investigated within the mindfulness field, since the 'positive' therapeutic benefits of training have been emphasised (Lindahl et al., 2014: 2; Lindahl, 2017; Kornfield, 1979). The unusual affects and body-consciousness related experiences mostly remain hidden, or at least downplayed, in the materials we have studied so far.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have problematised the idea of mindfulness as a 'free-floating' and universal *panacea*. By situating mindfulness within a specific training environment, we have implicitly criticised the idea that mindfulness is a totalising discourse, producing the same effects everywhere it goes – such as individualisation or self-governance. We have shown how, rather than being a singular and coherent totality, the therapeutic culture of mindfulness can be understood as an assemblage.

When we look at what happens during specific occasions of mindfulness teaching in action, we find a complex reality which cannot be easily accounted for by notions of an amorphous 'therapy culture' (Furedi, 2004). Our analysis has given special attention to the multiple affective-discursive practices, which are put together to 'make up' mindful bodies – visualising, technologising and naturalising. Such metaphors and similes are used within an overarching framework in which mindfulness, within the specific context we have studied, is spatialised as a 'laboratory of practice'. Yet, even this framework of meaning was subtly challenged by some participants who attempted to transcend the boundaries of the self-healing laboratory, opening up a 'doorway' into a realm which we described as involving a 'post-secular' sacralising of space.

Our analysis illustrates how the affective-discursive practices making up mindfulness training may possess multiple functions with potentially contradictory effects. Mindfulness-based therapies humanise cognitive-behaviourism, bringing humanistic and Asian-inspired practices into the heartland of 'evidence-based' clinical psychology and medicine (Dryden & Still, 2006). By importing the body, meditation and emotional awareness into evidence-based psychotherapy, MBCT pushes against the boundaries of cognitive science. Mindfulness potentially softens the rigid boundaries of experimentalism, allowing a sense of 'beauty', 'wonder' and 'the sacred' to be drawn into the matrix of the 'psychological complex' (Rose, 1985). Yet, at the same time, meditation itself is being imagined as a simultaneously organic and technoscientific hybrid. The logic of scientific observation, experimentation and discovery are possibly being distributed into the body politic

through mindfulness training courses, similarly to how medical ideas are being spread through the mindfulness movement (Barker, 2014).

Mark Williams, the innovative co-founder of MBCT, offers multiple perspectives on the meditative experience. His expert teaching of mindfulness allows for various interpretations of what a 'mindful' experience can be like. He makes available a diversity of resources, such that people can make 'choices' about how they practice mindfulness. This open-endedness of self-care practices allows mindfulness to become a potentially never-ending pursuit of self-improvement and healing (Barker, 2014; Vogel, 2017). The training we have analysed creates new norms for embodied healthcare which have historical precedents and the multiplicity of the mindfulness assemblage serves the open-endedness of its techniques.

Yet, there are limits to this multiplicity. The rigorous training involved in mindfulness practice potentially produces a standardising of theory and practice, which parallels early attempts in psychology to apply introspection as a scientific method (Coon, 1993). Within the mindfulness training session we analysed, the mindful bodies that are being co-produced by the expert teacher and his students are not explicitly marked by social difference or diversity. The mind-body of the mindfulness practitioner, at least within this DoP, is presented as being able-bodied and implied to be genderless, sexless, raceless and classless. That is, no explicit topicalising of sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or class takes place within this MBCT training event, although the ageing body is implicitly acknowledged in the 'bus pass' anecdote. In this sense, mindful bodies are implied to be universal and transcendent of society, culture and history (Drage, 2018a, 2018b). Being mindful is also suggested to be independent of religious or political belief. Mindfulness is made to be a universally accessible technique, applicable to all people at all times, and in principle inclusive of everyone's experience.

Paradoxically, this universalising is being done by a seemingly homogenous group of people. In common with Anglo-American 'convert' Buddhist groups, the population of mindfulness teachers and trainers have anecdotally been reported as being relatively homogenous – mostly white and middle-class – and course attendees tend to be white, middle-aged, and highly educated females (Wilson, 2014; see also Figure 2.1). American Buddhist meditation is advertised to young, white, middle-class, female city-dwellers (Mitchell, 2014). Yet, the founders of MBSR and MBCT are commonly identified as white, male, Anglo-American scientists and clinical psychologists, with especially female and Asian founders often being forgotten within historical accounts. Feminist philosophers of science have challenged the ideal of the 'objective observer' in science and exposed the assumptions made in behaviourist and cognitivist theories of the body. In her essay 'Loving the computer: cognition, embodiment and the influencing machine', philosopher Elizabeth Wilson suggests that 'at the heart of cognitive theories we find the body of the thinking man' (Wilson, 1996: 557).

We found mindfulness-based therapeutics to be a complex milieu and domain of practice, distinguished by multiplicity and paradox. Indeed, it is arguably the variety of influences, paradoxical tensions and contradictory functions of the mindfulness assemblage which contribute to its productive power. In our view,

the productive power of mindfulness, and its potentially curative properties, are principally the result of the contradictory practices which make up this community of practice. Assemblage thinking and affective-discursive practice analysis, when combined together, help to illustrate how tensions and contradictions can be productive of knowledge. In our study, we have not interviewed participants of mindfulness courses to find out about their experiences of mindfulness, yet our analysis suggests how future studies might investigate the ways meditation is learned and experienced by participants, and how teachers and students of mindfulness manage tensions and contradictions of mindfulness practice. It will be interesting also to discover in future investigations how the multiple meanings of mindfulness, which make it so transferable and portable, are interpreted by diverse social actors, across a broader range of institutional and geographical contexts and situations. MBSR and MBCT are now being exported from Anglo-American contexts to North Western and Eastern Europe and even to Asian countries, under the banner of 'global mental health'. Future social studies of mindfulness might investigate how such practices are being received in the places where they allegedly originated.

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