

Varieties of mindfulness for creative OR Practice

José-Rodrigo Córdoba-Pachón (j.r.cordoba-pachon@rhul.ac.uk)

59th UK Operational Research Conference

University of Loughborough, UK

September 12-14 2017

Work-in-progress paper

Problem Structuring Methods (PSM) stream

Introduction

This paper addresses the question of how human experience can be fully brought forth in nurturing creative OR practice, something that the author began to explore a few years back (Córdoba-Pachón, 2011). To address the question, two different takes on *mindfulness* (being fully in the present) are explored (Langer, 2014, Kabat Zinn, 2001). One in which presence is encouraged through the review and reframing of categories used to conceive of a situation and its context. The second enables individuals to become more aware of their thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations within or beyond a given situation. Both of these types of mindfulness aim to enhance awareness and empower individuals regarding their choices of thinking and acting.

The paper suggests that there could be complementarity between these two forms of mindfulness. Whilst the first one seems to be a more 'hands-on' approach aligned with an overall concern for 'scientific' or 'core OR' problem structuring situations, the second one could help those involved in such situations to open new avenues of enquiry.

The paper is structured as follows. A brief contextualisation of the importance of awareness in creativity is offered and followed by an overview of mindfulness. Two varieties of mindfulness are offered with their features. Reflections from attempting to implement them in relevant OR situations offer some insights for their future adoption in the OR community.

Creativity and (self) awareness

A concern with the psychological aspects of practice (or what goes in people's heads when engaged in dealing with problems) has brought interest within and beyond the field of OR. Two relevant questions from the field of creativity refer to where creativity resides (in an individual, a group, an environment) (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and how can it be increased through conscious effort (Runco and Albert, 2010). These questions come to aid the use of techniques to foster creativity individually or collectively and call for broadening our understanding of PSM/OR/Systems practice as going beyond methodology use.

The interest in psychology as a source of inspiration for OR also follows a degree of dissatisfaction with problem structuring as a methodology-guided effort which might not reveal all the complexities involved in a situation. In addition, a trend which academic scholars are now pursuing is paying attention to the diversity of people, their personality traits and the influence of cultures in them (Cain, 2012). (Self) awareness and the experience that comes with it are being encouraged as valuable sources of knowledge to help us gain a better idea of the world we are living in and how to explore it further (Varela et al,1993). Awareness also invites us to develop new forms of relationship with ourselves, others and our environments. This holds valid in a world in which complexity and unpredictability show that this world is not interested in our happiness or in satisfying our own needs whilst still encouraging us to do so (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Puett and Gross-Loh, 2016).

Creativity then could foster self-awareness and with it contribute to address current issues of the world we live in (Barron,1997). Stemming from research in psychology and now being studied in other fields including education and management, it is being recently conceived of as not residing in an individual or a group but in several other knowledge elements and relationships between them (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). For individuals, gaining access to and mastery of these systemic elements requires focusing their attention and dedication. Mindfulness as a practice that aims to help us live more fully in the present (Kabat-Zinn, 2001) comes handy to foster such features.

Two takes on mindfulness

Often, mindfulness is associated with creativity (Langer, 2001), heartfulness (Kabat-Zinn,2001), stress and anxiety/reduction or relapse prevention (Williams et al, 2007). This diversity has been recently enriched with new applications of mindfulness in several areas of human life. The following figure aims to give a glimpse about different mindfulness-based practices:

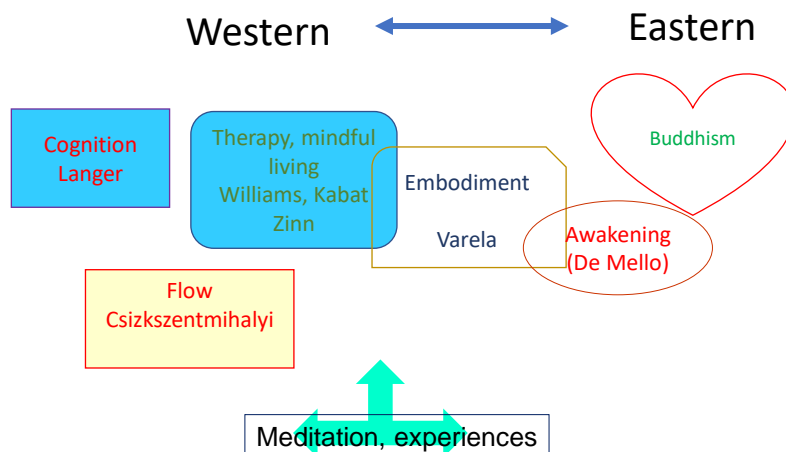


Figure 1. An overview of perspectives on mindfulness (source: the author).

The diagram aims to convey a broad distinction between Western and Eastern perspectives on mindfulness with a main difference on positioning mindfulness as a practice inside or outside specific religions (i.e. Buddhism) and more specific differences in terms the aims and specific techniques used. Two specific or varieties of mindfulness can be distilled (following the blue highlighted areas in the diagram): One which arose from the work of Ellen Langer on cognitive psychology (2014) and one stemming from the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) and associates (Williams et al, 2007). These can be termed cognitive mindfulness (CM) and therapeutic mindfulness (TM).

Cognitive Mindfulness (CM)	Therapeutic Mindfulness (TM)
Principles (Langer, 2014): Openness to new information, variability (context, identity), taking on new perspectives, process over content (output), conditionality	Principles (Kabat-Zinn, 2001): Non-judging, patience, beginner’s mind, trusting oneself, non-striving, acceptance (of things /people as they are), letting go, commitment, discipline, intentionality (having a unique and personal vision).
Techniques: Reframing of contexts, review of categories, promoting ‘could be’ thinking.	Techniques: Short and long meditations, mindful activities and experiences

Table 1. Two takes on mindfulness

Cognitive mindfulness or CM has become a concept which to Langer (2014) is associated with its opposite (mindlessness). CM aims to challenge existing thinking categories that we all hold as ‘true’ when we navigate our worlds. These categories could be *mindsets or sets of assumptions* we often

and unconsciously use. Categories get imprinted in our thinking due to among other things unconditional learning. CM aims to nurture continuous revision of our thinking categories through being open to new information, being open to new perspectives, focusing on process rather than on content (output), allowing conditionality in knowledge that we learn or use and accepting variability of contexts and the people within them (including ourselves).

Therapeutic mindfulness or TM aims to enable individuals to notice and/or become more aware of themselves in terms of their thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations (Kabat-Zinn, 2001). Stress and other conditions are the result of individuals operating too much in the 'doing' mode rather than in the 'being' one. This latter is what allows for curious, accepting, non-judgmental and self-compassionate noticing of what goes on with ourselves (mind and body) and the world around us and with a view to cultivate these qualities and thus improve inner and outer relationships (Ibid). TM uses meditation techniques. This author's experience is that in practice, self-awareness can be also nurtured through a combination of meditation and non-judgmental collaborative enquiry. With this, the aim is to help individuals notice patterns or habits of thinking, reacting and doing which could help us improve our awareness and with it give us more and more adequate well-being choices.

Some reflections and implications for future OR practice

In early 2017, an experience with young OR practitioners using some techniques that seemed 'aligned' to the above varieties yielded valuable insights. Some practitioners saw mindfulness as a 'nice' but 'not very useful' metaphor when it came to help them decide what to do in their practice. On the other hand, participants found valuable having a pause during their working day, registering/annotating their thoughts (this is an interesting 'practice' which we could all become more mindful of) and even questioning what was their next career step (to which this author offered own experience of becoming mindful about the non-human size of many of our OR jobs out there!).

From these insights, it seems that the tailoring of the above two varieties of mindfulness for PSM/OR/Systems Practice is a worthwhile and open-ended effort. Pursing it further would first require OR practitioners to review their purpose in doing so: Is it to enhance the 'efficiency' of interventions by enabling the generation of creative ideas or useful practice checkpoints when using OR techniques or models to deal with messy problems? Or is it putting questions about the daily wellbeing of people on the discussion table?

In any case, these varieties face the challenge of being considered 'hard' to put or sustain in practice (Langer, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2001). To address this, it could well be that these two varieties become complementary if used together with a view to promote open learning about situations. Cognitive mindfulness or CM could help people increase their self-awareness within their OR area of work, whilst therapeutic mindfulness or TM could help us better understand ourselves within and outside work, how we (could better) relate to ourselves and others. This is a possibility that could be explored further. To do so, it is important to acknowledge that although potentially sharing some common features, they stem from different scientific traditions. CM has been tested empirically via cognitive

experiments. Assessments of TM are on the increase and there are very positive results (Kabat-Zinn, 2001, pp.xli-xlv) but its focus is more on practical experience than target specific empirical validation.

A next step in this research is to gain further awareness in the experiencing of mindfulness within the OR community and review some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the what, how and why of our OR practice.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Mrs Sue Bailey from CornerHouse Ltd in the UK for her generous advice and mindful mentoring on mindfulness and to participants in practical OR sessions during 2017.

References

- Barron, F. (1997). Introduction. In *Creators on Creating: Awakening and Cultivating the Imaginative Mind* (Barron, F., Montuori, A., Barron, A, Eds). New York: Jeremy Tarcher (Penguin), pp.1-22.
- Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*. New York: Penguin.
- Córdoba-Pachón, J.R. (2011). Embracing human experience in applied systems thinking. *Systems Research and Behavioural Science*, 28: 680-688.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). New Edition. *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*. London: Rider.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2001). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. 2nd Edition. New York: Bantam Books.
- Langer, E. (2014). *Mindfulness*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Philadelphia (PA): DaCapo Press.
- Puett, M. and Gross-Loh, C. (2016). *The Path: A New Way to Think About Everything*. New York: Penguin.
- Runco, M. and Albert, R. (2010). Creativity Research: A Historical Review. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity* (Kaufmann, J and Sternberg, R. Eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.3-20.
- Varela, F., Thompson, E. and Rosch, E. (1993). *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press.
- Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z and Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*. New York: The Guildford Press.