



University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
**Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative  
Exchange**

---

University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects

University of Tennessee Honors Program

---

Spring 4-2004

# Narrative Structure and Mindfulness

Meredith Ann Yeager

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj)

---

## Recommended Citation

Yeager, Meredith Ann, "Narrative Structure and Mindfulness" (2004). *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/811](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/811)

This is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Tennessee Honors Program at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Meredith A. Yeager

College: Arts and Sciences Department: Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Robert Wahler

PROJECT TITLE: Narrative Structure and Mindfulness

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Robert G. Wahler, Faculty Mentor

Date: 4-30-04

Comments (Optional):

Running head: Narrative Structure

Narrative Structure and Mindfulness

Meredith Yeager

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Abstract

The concept of mindfulness has only been recently introduced into the research literature of psychology. However, the benefits of being mindful have been well-documented. Mindfulness training has produced many favorable results and could have significant implications for the future in both the clinic and the general population. Relatedly, in even more recent years, the study of one's personal narrative as a map of how one perceives their environment has become a topic of interest. The ability to create a rich, coherent, and autonomous autobiographical story could be related to one's ability to become more mindful. With a well-organized perceptual template in which others' views are taken into consideration and the past is both recognized and synthesized, one is more likely to be taught to become mindful.

### Narrative Structure and Mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness, as an area of psychological interest, is a fairly new field of inquiry. Research on the differences between mindful and mindless behavior has only been conducted over the past three decades (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Thus, the construct of mindfulness is not fully understood resulting in the conceptualization of multiple definitions of the construct. However, the body of evidence showing the psychological, emotional, and physiological benefits of being more mindful continues to grow, demonstrating the importance of this state of consciousness.

The Western concept of mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism and the Eastern contemplative traditions (Langer, 1989). In the Buddhist belief system, mindfulness means focusing one's attention on the present and liberating oneself from any preoccupation with the past or future (Horowitz, 2002). This basic tenet has been expanded upon to encompass aspects of cognition, emotion, physical sensations, the self, and the environment in the current Westernized definitions of mindfulness.

Ellen Langer's construct of mindfulness, which has elicited a great amount of investigation and research, contains several key aspects: an orientation in the present moment, the recognition of multiple perspectives in solving problems, a sensitivity to context and the environment, an openness to novel situations and new information, and an awareness of distinction (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000; Sternberg, 2000). By drawing novel distinctions, one is kept in the present moment (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). By viewing each experience as fresh and new, one avoids being forced to rely on categories and distinctions made in the past.

However, Langer's definition of this concept seems almost exclusively focused on the external environment and much defined in its application. She discusses mindfulness with particular reference to learning, arguing that the passive absorption of information, especially within the classroom, fosters a mindless pattern of thinking (Langer, 2000).

Brown and Ryan (2003) have provided another aspect to the elusive concept of mindfulness in their development of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The MAAS is more focused on measuring the "presence or absence of attention and awareness of what is occurring in the present rather than on attributes such as acceptance, trust, empathy, gratitude, or the various others that have been associated with mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 824)." Thus, mindfulness can be conceived as continuous awareness of or attention to ongoing events.

The MAAS and Langer's Mindfulness/Mindlessness Scale (MMS) were found to have a correlation of around .32 (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Thus, while the two measures do have some overlap, there is an obvious separateness between the two scales. The cognitive flexibility subscale of the MMS was completely unrelated to the MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Hence, Brown and Ryan's (2003) concept of mindfulness is more concerned with the simple attention to and processing of data in the environment. Langer's definition, on the other hand, may be a more complex step in the development of mindful thinking: interpreting this data taken in from the environment and using the information to create these insightful distinctions.

Thus, it may be more helpful to think of mindfulness as a cognitive process rather than a conglomeration of different abilities. An open and receptive awareness of and attention to both internal and external environmental cues would be the first necessary step. However, the creation and application of novel and new categories, taking multiple perspectives into consideration, would be the next necessary step in order to respond mindfully.

In addition to the external aspects of mindfulness concerning attention and problem-solving in the environment, there is an internal facet to the concept: self-observation. Self-observation is a “conscious reflection and interpretation of one’s stream of sensation, emotion, and thought” (Horowitz, 2002, p. 115). Through self-observation one can recognize attitudes and thoughts that are dysfunctional or inappropriate and create possible alternative considerations (Horowitz, 2002).

Becoming more aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions also allows one to relate to them differently. Rather than identifying with negative habitual thought patterns, one can view them as passing mental events that may or may not accurately reflect reality (Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby, & Lau, 2000). This ability to observe one’s thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations can provide one with a more objective and reflective view of the self.

Thus, being fully present includes being more consciously aware of both the external environment and one’s own internal world of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. In sum, the concept of mindfulness seems to involve some core aspects:

creating novel distinctions, attending to ongoing current experiences, and reflecting upon one's own internal thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Even taken at face value, one can see the obvious positive aspects of being in a more mindful state of cognition. Indeed, mindfulness has been found to be related to many qualities that are associated with psychological well-being. Brown and Ryan (2003) discovered multiple significant correlations with the MAAS. Mindfulness was found to be associated with openness to experience, life satisfaction, a need for cognition, higher self-esteem, greater autonomy, better physical health, and greater competence (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The MAAS was inversely related to public self-consciousness and social anxiety, rumination, neuroticism, depression, anxiety and somatization (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Thus, the benefits of being more mindful are numerous and they illustrate the important implications this concept could have for the promotion of psychological well-being.

Yet, mindless automatic thinking seems to be the norm. An example commonly used to illustrate this tendency is an experience shared by almost everyone: driving down a familiar highway and realizing that one has been traveling for miles without any awareness of the road or other cars. Mindlessness is a kind of "autopilot" of the mind. It may not be very practical to be fully mindful at all times. However, when one is trapped in these automatic, habitual thought processes the results can be damaging, whether it is the ruminative thought patterns of a patient with MDD, the continued use of an ineffective parenting style, the passive absorption of information within the classroom, or simply making careless mistakes.



Due to the psychological, emotional, and physical benefits of mindfulness and the negative consequences of mindless thinking, training and therapeutic techniques designed to promote more mindful awareness have been developed. Some of these techniques focus on active distinction making or an attentive awareness of one's present surroundings, sensations, thoughts, and feelings (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies, 1989; Teasdale et al., 2000). Many of these mindfulness training methods have been shown to have beneficial effects for the participants. Thus, learning to be more present-oriented, attentive, and reflective in one's thinking can be valuable.

Aside from any training or therapy, mindfulness has been found to correlate with certain personality traits. Brown and Ryan (2003) found a positive relationship between the MAAS and openness to experience and an inverse relationship with neuroticism. In a pilot study conducted by Wahler and colleagues (2003), a similar inverse relationship was found between Langer's MMS and neuroticism; however the only significant positive correlations found were with extraversion and conscientiousness. Thus, the predisposition to be a more mindful individual is present, and different definitions of mindfulness may be related to different aspects of one's personality. That is, genetic traits often serve to guide one's manner of responding to events in the world.

This unique form of within-person guidance is further accentuated when people learn to construct stories of their personal experiences. Beginning in the 1980's, the field of psychology has experienced a growing interest in the composition of these autobiographical narratives and how the structure of one's personal story is related to one's identity, well-being, and perceptions of the surrounding world (McAdams, 2001).

The structure of one's autobiographical narrative can be thought of as a reliable map of how one perceives the world. Yet, it may be a more flexible and malleable aspect of one's make-up than the enduring traits of personality. This perceptual template provides one with a blueprint of how to organize and make sense of one's environment, thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The structural quality of one's life script can provide the listener with clues concerning how the narrator processes and understands his or her current experiences. While there may be many different methods for examining an autobiographical narrative, three structural qualities are of interest here: coherence, richness, and attachment style.

Baerger and McAdams (1999) created a comprehensive model of the coherence of autobiographical narratives. Their model contains four features: orientation, structure, affect, and integration. The orientation of a story provides the listener with a context or background information. The structure index concerns temporal ordering of the described episode, presenting events in chronological order or as logically causal. The third feature, affect, concerns evaluative aspects of the narrative and provides an affective tone and the emotional significance of the story. Integration requires the ability to synthesize the pieces of the narrative into a congruent whole.

Utilizing this model, Baerger and McAdams (1999) found that life story coherence exhibited a great deal of reliability across different types of memory episodes. Thus, participants received similar coherence scores for each narrative that they gave. Furthermore, those who related a coherent narrative also reported greater psychological

well-being. Coherence was found to have positive correlations with happiness and life satisfaction and an inverse relationship with depression (Baerger & McAdams, 1999).

However, Baerger and McAdams (1999) seem to have created an all inclusive definition of life story coherence, combining organizational aspects of the narrative with more insightful features, under the one broad construct of coherence. In an unpublished manuscript, Castlebury and Wahler (1999) created guidelines for coding personal narratives in which organizational and evaluative aspects of life stories were separated into two distinct constructs of coherence and richness.

While coherence can be operationalized in different ways, this aspect of coherence, as defined by Castlebury and Wahler (1999), deals mainly with the organizational qualities of the story, its relevance to the question at hand, and its intelligibility. They provide five coding guidelines for rating the coherence of an autobiographical story. These include:

1. Upon reading the narrative do you as the listener *clearly* get the *point (or points)* made by the narrator?
2. Are all the ideas or happenings presented by the narrator *relevant* to the question being asked?
3. Does the narrator's response follow a *clear* progression (beginning, middle, end)?
4. Is the narrator's response free of *tangential* remarks?
5. Do the *parts* of the narrator's response fit together to form a *sensible whole*?

(Castlebury & Wahler, 1999, p. 3)

Related to Brown and Ryan's (2003) conceptualization of mindfulness as attention to and awareness of one's environment, in order to create a coherent story one must be able to attend to the question being asked and stay on task while responding. However, it also seems likely that the coherence of one's story, as it is currently described, would be related to one's attentiveness and awareness during the actual experience of the event.

Castlebury and Wahler (1999) isolated the quality of richness as a separate and distinct structural property as well. Again providing five coding guidelines, their characterization of richness involves the elaboration of ideas, providing specific and concrete events, avoiding vague or ambiguous speech, discussing the perspectives of other individuals, and offering insight into one's own thoughts, feelings, or emotions through evaluative comments.

Thus, similar to both Langer's concept of mindfulness and Horowitz's description of self-observation, providing a rich narrative involves the recognition of multiple perspectives, the ability to observe and describe one's internal state, and the capacity to make distinctions by providing details and concrete events rather than broad or vague generalizations.

The structural qualities of coherence and richness of an autobiographical narrative seem to have subtle connections to the facets of distinction making and perception taking, attention and awareness, and self-observation. Yet, encompassing all conceptualizations

of mindfulness, including those of the Buddhist tradition, is the idea of consciously *being* in the present moment.

Tolle (1999) a popular speaker, author, and modern-day guru has coined two terms that provide an interesting and descriptive distinction between being present or stuck in the past and future. “Clock time” refers to the application of time in the practical aspects of life, meaning that one’s memories and plans are attended to but not the objects of continued focus (Tolle, 1999, p. 46).

Tolle (1999) refers to the latter focus as “psychological time” or “identification with the past and continuous compulsive projection into the future” (p. 47). Obviously, these human tendencies interfere with being present and, thus, it would seem that one must be fully present while on the path to these goals, rather than seeing the current experiences only as a means to an end and allowing one’s self-concept to be totally dependent upon the outcome of these goals. Thus, it is important to consider the practical aspects of memories and plans and to avoid entangling one’s identity within them.

This tendency for some individuals to become stuck in psychological time and to project themselves into the past or future can be illustrated in their personal narratives as well. George, Kaplan, and Main (1985) using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) have derived four retrospective styles from their data analyses (Wahler & Porter, 2004).

While retrospective data have been criticized as unreliable (Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Fox, 1995), the AAI does not assume that the recollections are accurate or that the autobiographical narrative purely represents one’s past psychological history. Instead these personal accounts correspond to the adult’s current mental

representation of childhood attachment experiences. A critical assumption of the AAI is that “autobiographical memory is the ongoing reconstruction of one’s past, in light of new experiences” (Ijzendoorn, 1995, p.388). Thus, the creation of the AAI represents a fundamental shift from looking at simple descriptions of childhood experiences to examining how the mental representations of these experiences are currently constructed and illustrated in one’s autobiographical narrative (Ijzendoorn, 1995).

Therefore, the AAI is primarily concerned with the style by which the personal narrative is constructed. The four retrospective methods resulting from analysis of data derived from the Adult Attachment Interview are autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, and unresolved/disorganized. However, participants classified as unresolved/disorganized are also placed in one of the three other categories (Ijzendoorn, 1995).

Individuals classified as autonomous or secure provide a narrative that is clear, coherent, relevant, consistent, and concise (Ijzendoorn, 1995). Providing an autonomous narrative does not require the participant to describe only positive and supportive experiences. Even descriptions of difficult or negative experiences can be categorized as autonomous as long as the evaluation of these experiences is coherent (Ijzendoorn, 1995).

Thus, an autonomous attachment would lend itself to a narrative that is well-organized and reflective. This autonomous attachment style would allow an individual to view the past objectively and apply information from these past experiences when they are relevant to current ongoing events. Thus, the provision of an autonomous narrative seems to illustrate a mindful perceptual and cognitive process.

However, an individual classified as dismissive provides a story fraught with contradictions that seem to go unnoticed on the part of the narrator (IJzendoorn, 1995). Dismissing participants may claim that they cannot recall early childhood memories; however, it seems more likely that they simply “minimize their attention to attachment-related experiences” (IJzendoorn, 1995, p. 388).

Hence, a participant who presents a dismissive narrative has possibly created a premature resolution of the past in which they have never truly bothered to reflectively examine life events. A dismissive individual would be unable to recognize the effects of past experiences on their current ongoing activities. Without examining the past, one could not identify and, thus, avoid the usage of habitual, automatic, thought processes or stereotypical categories that pervade one’s cognitions. Therefore, there is little possibility for altering these cognitive processes if one is unwilling to even acknowledge that they exist.

A dismissive individual would also most likely be very agenda-oriented. Current activities would likely be viewed simply as a means to achieve some goal in the future. Therefore, the possibility of happiness or well-being would be projected onto some later event. By constantly projecting oneself into the future, one’s self-concept and identity become dependent upon the outcome of these goals, whether good or bad. This could quite easily result in a pessimistic view of both the present and the future.

Unlike a dismissive individual, a participant classified as preoccupied would display “a confused, angry, or passive preoccupation with attachment figures” (IJzendoorn, 1995, p. 388). The narrative provided would violate both the maxims of

quantity and manner (IJzendoorn, 1995). A preoccupied individual excessively attends to attachment-related experiences, losing focus on the task at hand (IJzendoorn, 1995).

Therefore, someone categorized as preoccupied remains psychologically in the past. This individual either ruminates or revels in past experiences at the cost of attending to the present moment. They have created an identity solely dependent upon their history rather than integrating past experiences with the present moment. Unlike a dismissive individual, someone with a preoccupied style may actually actively apply stereotypical categories to the present moment. When a person is stuck in the past, he or she cannot recognize and understand the importance of the intricate distinctions and details of the present moment.

These narrative styles create part of the perceptual map or template through which the world is viewed. Thus, this psychological state also affects one's behavior. Adult attachment representations are correlated with appropriate responsiveness shown by the parent to his or her own child (IJzendoorn, 1995). In a meta-analysis conducted by IJzendoorn (1995), about 12% of variation in parental responsiveness was accounted for by parental attachment status, with a combined effect size of .72 (IJzendoorn, 1995). Thus, the individual's mental representation does indeed have an important effect on his or her behavior.

This behavior in turn affects the child's attachment. IJzendoorn (1995) found a large and stable relationship between the autonomy of the parent and the security of the child. Thus, autonomous parents can attend to their infant, consistently respond to their



child's needs, and allow for a secure attachment. Whereas a preoccupied or dismissive parent may respond either inconsistently or inappropriately, denying the child the stability needed for a secure attachment. Preoccupied or dismissive individuals cannot mindfully respond to their infant in the present moment because they are stuck in the past or the future.

Without consistent and appropriate responsiveness to the infant, it is possible that the parent will remain unresponsive as the child ages. This environment of unpredictability and insensitivity to the child's needs may not only result in an insecure attachment, but also an insecure narrative development in the child. It is believed that through the act of remembering or reminiscing, the child learns how to not only discuss their memories of the past but how to formulate them as well (Nelson, 1993).

Responsiveness to one's child within this social dance obviously requires mindful behavior. The parent must be aware of and attentive to the child's cues. The actual response must take not only the individual child but also the context into consideration in order to be appropriate.

Therefore, once a coherent, rich, and autonomous perceptual template is operating effectively, more mindful behavior is the result. However, if one perceives her or his environment as disorganized, vague and deficient, and solely through a filter of the past or future then responsiveness to that environment is limited.

In summary, the depth and richness of one's autobiographical narrative shows one's ability to recognize the perspectives of others. This aspect also requires one to self-observe,

describing her or his own feelings concerning the situation. In addition, elaboration through the provision of details and specifics, the individual sets that event apart as a distinct situation rather than a broad or vague generalization or category of behaviors.

Thus, structural qualities of the narrative may possibly illustrate mindfulness as a cognitive and perceptual process rather than a broad grouping of certain abilities. If the structure of one's narrative is a map of how one perceives the world, then one's description of autobiographical memories should illustrate whether or not this mindful process is at work. Thus, there is a possibility that the restructuring of the narrative could be used as a means to alter one's perceptual template to a more mindful style of cognitive processing. Therefore, narrative restructuring by an experienced and responsive guide could be considered a mindfulness training in itself, allowing for perceptual changes necessary to the mindful process.

*Works Cited*

- Alexander, C. N., Langer, E. J., Newman, R. I., Chandler, H. M., & Davies, J. L. (1989). Transcendental meditation, mindfulness, and longevity: An experimental study with the elderly. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *57* (6), 950-964.
- Baerger, D. R., & McAdams, D. P. (1999). Life story coherence and its relation to psychological well-being. Narrative Inquiry, *9* (1), 69-96.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *84* (4), 822-848.
- Castlebury, F. D., & Wahler, R. G. (1999). Guidelines in coding the personal narratives of children, parents and teachers. Unpublished manuscript, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- Fox, N. A. (1995). Of the way we were: Adult memories about attachment experiences and their role in determining infant-parent relationships: A commentary on van Ijzendoorn (1995). Psychological Bulletin, *117* (3), 404-410.
- Henry, B., Moffitt, T. E., Caspi, A., Langley, J., & Silva, P. A. (1994). On the "remembrance of things past": A longitudinal evaluation of the retrospective method. Psychological Assessment, *6* (2), 92-101.
- Horowitz, M. J. (2002). Self-and relational observation. Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, *12* (2), 115-127.
- Ijzendoorn, M. H. (1995). Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the adult attachment

- interview. Psychological Bulletin, 117 (3), 387-403.
- Langer, E. J. (1989). Mindfulness. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Langer, E. J., (2000). Mindful learning. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9 (6), 220-223.
- Langer, E. J., & Moldoveanu, M. (2000). The construct of mindfulness. Journal of Social Issues, 56 (1), 1-9.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. Review of General Psychology, 5 (2), 100-122.
- Nelson, K. (1993). The psychological and social origins of autobiographical memory. Psychological Science, 4 (1), 7-14.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2000). Images of mindfulness. Journal of Social Issues, 56 (1), 11-26.
- Teasdale, J. D., Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., Ridgeway, V. A., Soulsby, J. M., Lau, M. A. (2000). Prevention of relapse/recurrence in major depression by mindfulness-Based cognitive therapy. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 68 (4), 615-623.
- Tolle, E. (1999). The Power of Now. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Wahler, R. G., & Porter, L. G. Mindful and mindless facets of parenting style: Implications for clinical work with parents. Unpublished manuscript, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.