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# From Goal-Striving to "Right Intention": A Grounded Theory Analysis of Interviews with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Participants

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From Goal-Striving to "Right Intention": A Grounded Theory Analysis of Interviews with

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Participants

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Abstract

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) helps people to manage stress reactivity through contemplative practices such as meditation.  The creator of the program, Kabat-Zinn (1994), defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (p. 4).  Shapiro et al. (2006) clarified this definition as consisting of three mechanisms of mindfulness.  In particular, their mechanism "intention" captures Kabat-Zinn's phrase "on purpose."  Historically, mindfulness practices were intended to cultivate compassion and insight; thus, practitioners' intentions need to be included in a psychological model of mindfulness (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2000).  In keeping with their approach, this project explored the concept of intentionality as reported by MBSR practitioners.  Participants often begin the course expecting to achieve stress relief, psychological change, or some other concrete outcome (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Santorelli, 1999).  During the course, there is often a shift in their understanding of mindfulness practice: from a method of goal-attainment to a way of *being*. This shift in intention has not been studied directly; the guiding research question therefore was, "After taking the MBSR course, how do participants discuss shifts in their intention to practice mindfulness?"  The data were semi-structured conversations conducted with participants ($N = 14$) who completed the MBSR program. The approach used was Grounded Theory (GT), a systematic method of content analysis (Charmaz, 1995).  Using a process of constant comparison, codes were sub-divided, grouped and integrated to create themes within and across participant interviews.  Three themes emerged: *Doing: Practicing to Achieve*, *Being: Practicing to Become Mindful*, and *Shifting Awareness: From Doing to Being*.  Findings support the idea that any model of mindfulness ought to take practitioners' intentions into account as they are complex and may impact the efficacy of MBSR.

From goal-striving to "right intention": A grounded theory analysis of interviews with

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction participants.

Anxiety, depression, and chronic pain are crippling ailments to endure. Many patients

turn to medications and a variety of therapies to relieve their distress. However, even effective

treatments may not completely eradicate symptoms. Research has shown that interventions like

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) can help patients learn to live with debilitating

conditions when traditional medicine cannot alleviate pain altogether. While there is a great deal

of quantitative research addressing the efficacy of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs),

there is a lack of research detailing the psychological mechanisms through which these programs

actually work. The current project explored how graduates of an MBSR program discussed

changes in their intention to practice mindfulness before, during, and after the course.

To understand the foundations of mindfulness-based practices, this paper first describes

the fundamental concepts of Buddhist Psychology. The intention is to review the modern-day,

Western understanding of mindfulness: the primary mechanism of MBSR. After integrating the

origins of mindfulness practices with their current clinical applications, an overview of

quantitative studies looking at the efficacy of MBIs is provided and the drawbacks of common

mindfulness measures are discussed. While quantitative methods are relevant and important for

outcome research, qualitative approaches expand the type of research questions that may be

explored. Grounded Theory (GT) the qualitative framework for analyzing interview data used in

this research project is described. Finally, extant research pertaining to MBI participants'

expectations and goals is addressed.

**Buddhist Psychology**

Mindfulness is a term taken from Buddhist traditions developed over thousands of years. The legend of the Buddha is reportedly based on a historical figure, born into a royal family as Siddhartha Gautama in 563 B.C.E. After growing up in seclusion, away from the realities of old age, sickness and death, he was exposed to the problem of human misery, and sought to find some way to end it. He left his father's palace, and denounced worldly pleasures to seek wisdom and an end to all suffering. After years of practicing severe ascetic meditation with Hindu monks, he left to meditate under less extreme conditions. At the end of a period of constant meditation, he reportedly experienced "enlightenment": a deep insight into the nature of human suffering. He began sharing his insights with others, but highlighted that they needed to empirically explore their own minds, rather than accept his teachings as an ultimate reality (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000). Over many centuries, his teachings were adapted into various cultures. As Buddhist practices were imported into 20th century Western culture (e.g., Suzuki, 1970) they were seen primarily as a religion or a set of spiritual practices. More recently, scholars have come to appreciate the psychological components of these practices and the past three decades have seen significant incorporation of those techniques in secular approaches to health (Benson, 1983; Koerner & Linehan, 2000). However, various scholars are now highlighting that key concepts, critical to understanding how mindfulness works, were lost in translation (Grossman, 2011; Olendzki, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2006; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). The present paper examined one aspect of mindfulness that has been overlooked in the psychological literature: the practitioner's intention.

**The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.**  In order to understand critical concepts often overlooked by Western psychologists, one needs to understand Buddhist Psychology as it was initially taught.  "The Four Noble Truths" are the Buddha's explanation of the problem of suffering, which he saw as intrinsic to being human, while the "Eightfold Path" provides his solution, based on his direct experience. "The Four Noble Truths" is a common translation of the original Pali word, *cattāri ariyasaccāni* (Access to Insight, 2005). The word "truth" is not necessarily meant to capture an absolute reality, but rather refers to the universal conditions of being human.

The first of these universal conditions is that we experience suffering due to the impermanent nature of our internal and external worlds.  The second universal condition is that attachment, often translated as craving, is the root of suffering because we want unpleasant experiences to stop and pleasant experiences to last.  We are attached to our wishes for how we want the world to be, as well as our desire for permanence in a world where everything changes. The third universal condition, Buddha asserted, is that anyone can transcend suffering by cultivating an acceptance of things as they are, as opposed to wishing negative experiences would change into something "better," or wishing pleasant experiences would last permanently. The fourth universal condition is that all people can reduce, or even end, their suffering.  The Eightfold Path is a set of guidelines for mental discipline, behavior and social interaction, which enables the practitioner to become free from suffering.  While these guidelines provide the basis of religious faith in some eastern cultures, they can also be seen from a secular view as suggestions for how to become more consciously aware in various areas of daily life. These eight guidelines are right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right thought, and right concentration. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000; Olendzki, 2010).

Again, the interpretation of the translated word "right" in this case more closely resembles words like "skillful" or "wise" than some absolutely correct way of being (Olendzki, 2010). Of the mental disciplines outlined in the Eightfold path, the one of interest here is "Right Intention" "Right Intention" refers to the deliberate cultivation of more developed or skillful intentions to act or be in the world. Practitioners are generally assumed to meditate in order to become more fully aware, in order to gain insight into the workings of their minds and the nature of suffering.

**Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction**

MBSR is an eight-week program designed to help both clinical and non-clinical populations to manage stress reactivity through contemplative practices such as meditation, gentle yoga, and mindful walking.  Kabat-Zinn (1994) created this program in 1979; he defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (p. 4). Although Western psychologists reference this definition to justify their studies of mindfulness, few fully define mindfulness. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman (2006) are a rare exception: they clarified Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness by teasing apart three *axioms* they interpreted it to contain.  By axioms, Shapiro, et al. meant specific qualities of mindfulness.  In particular, their axiom "intention" captures Kabat-Zinn's phrase "on purpose."  Historically, mindfulness practices were intended to cultivate compassion and enlightenment which should be included in a model of mindfulness (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2000). In other words, Western psychologists seem often to ignore the purpose(s) for which a practitioner engages in mindfulness meditations.  By ignoring meditators' intentions, researchers are missing an important aspect of the process when they study their practice.

**Quantitative Approaches to MBSR Efficacy**

There is ample evidence supporting the efficacy of MBIs in improving both the physical and psychological well-being of participants (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carmody & Baer, 2007; Chapman & Salmon 1997; Davidson & Lutz, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008; Nyklicek & Kuijpers, 2008; Perlman, Salomons, Davidson & Lutz, 2010; Salmon, Santorelli, Sephton, Kabat-Zinn, 2009). In an attempt to study MBIs in more detail, several published self-report questionnaires aim to examine changes in mindfulness (Cardaciotto et al., 2008; Chadwick et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2006), usually in pre- to post-intervention designs. Grossman (2008, 2011) commented on the use of these questionnaires and suggested that these measures, while reliable, may not necessarily be valid. His main criticism is that they cannot measure "mindfulness" because Western psychologists have not fully defined mindfulness. The lack of a clear definition or objectively observable criterion makes it impossible to know what exactly is being measured. For example, some researchers treat mindfulness as a trait, similar to openness or agreeableness (Latzman & Masuda, 2013), while others treat it as an ongoing psychological state, akin to attentiveness (Langer, 1990). Neither of these relate to the initial definition found in Buddhist psychology. Further, several researchers have suggested that there is a lack of studies exploring *how* MBSR and other MBIs work (Mamberg, Bassarear & Schubert, 2013; Salmon et al., 2009; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). In order to understand this subjective experience, a clearer definition of mindfulness is needed. To address the elusive and complex nature of mindfulness and its subjective impact, the use of qualitative methods is necessary to describe practitioners' direct experiences.

**Qualitative Approaches to MBSR: Grounded Theory**

Following Shapiro et al.'s (2006) imperative to clarify intentionality when examining MBIs, the current study explores participants' reasons to practice by analyzing in-depth interviews. Qualitative MBSR studies are becoming more common in the last ten years, but are sometimes limited by the selected method of coding and analyzing data (Irving et al, 2012; Smith, Graham, & Senthinathan, 2007, Mackenzie et al, 2006). This is why Grounded Theory (GT) was utilized. GT is a systematic method of closely analyzing discourse to capture participants' meanings without imposing the researcher's agenda (Charmaz, 1995; Willig, 2008). For my purposes, I have distilled four discrete stages from the GT process. These stages consist of: (1) interviews structured to elicit participants' own narratives about their practice, (2) transcription of the digitally recorded interviews using a detailed scheme showing what participants said and how they said it, (3) Open Coding, which captures the content of what each participant said (as elaborated below, in the method section), (4) Focused Coding, which examines the coded content in order to identify common themes within and across participant interviews. Using a process of constant comparison, codes are sub-divided, revised and integrated, creating "thematic categories." GT entails an ongoing process of revising and re-interpreting until the data yields no additional themes. Various researchers have explored other aspects of MBSR utilizing GT to analyze journals (Kerr, Josyula, Littenberg, 2010), interviews (Mackenzie et al, 2006), and focus group transcripts (Irving et al, 2012).

**Previous Research Regarding Practitioners' Expectations and Goals.** People decide to practice mindfulness meditation for a variety of reasons. Doctors refer patients to MBSR programs when treatment for physical or mental ailments is not available or has been inadequate to reduce suffering. Others self-refer for reasons like life stress. More than 20,000 people have

taken the MBSR course at the Center for Mindfulness since its inception in 1979 (Santorelli, 2014); thousands more have taken the course around the world. The MBSR literature suggests that participants begin the MBSR course expecting to achieve tangible outcomes and that during the MBSR course, there is often a shift in understanding mindfulness as a way of *being* rather than a means to an end; their goals shift from outcome to growth and from product to lifestyle (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Santorelli, 1999). Despite these clinical anecdotes, researchers have not deliberately explored how participants shift from goal-striving to mindfully living. However, Mackenzie et al.'s (2006) qualitative study looked at nine patients in an oncology setting who had completed an MBSR program. Several participants reported taking the course because they felt there were no other treatment options. These participants saw MBSR as a final hope to change something about their fatal predicament. By the end of the course, participants stated that they found new ways of perceiving their present life situations; many saw mindfulness as a lifestyle, not simply another treatment or skill. This, and similar findings among health professionals (Irving, et al, 2012), served as the inspiration for a more detailed analysis of participant intentions in our data.

**The Present Study**

Given the gaps in the literature outlined above, the present study examined intentionality through interviews with former MBSR participants about their subjective experience of practicing mindfulness. The goal was to explore what participants learned from taking the course, as well as their stated intentions for taking the course, and particularly whether they reported their intentions to practice as having shifted once they learned MBSR. The guiding research question therefore was, "After taking the MBSR course, how do participants discuss

shifts in their intention to practice mindfulness?" Of specific interest were initial intentions

participants reported and additional intentions they reported during or after the program.

## Method

This study was a part of a larger project in which semi-structured interviews were

conducted with adult members of a small rural, liberal arts college community who had taken an

MBSR course with one of the principle investigators, a professor who was trained to teach the

MBSR course at the Center for Mindfulness. The purpose was to learn what participants' felt

was most helpful during and after the course and to understand how participants incorporated

MBSR into their self-portrayal. Relevant aspects of that larger study, as well as my specific

portion will be described here.

### Participants

Volunteers were recruited from among all who had completed an MBSR course on

campus in the past three years, and who had indicated at the completion of the course that they

would be interested in participating in future research studies. Participants ($N = 14$) consisted of

students, faculty, and staff (See Table 1). There were five students whose ages ranged from 21 to

26 ($\bar{x}$ : 22.4 years). There were nine faculty and staff whose ages ranged from 47 to 61 ($\bar{x}$ : 53.56

years). There were six males and eight females. It should be noted that no claims are made

regarding these subgroups. Demographics are provided for descriptive purposes only.

### Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in an office setting and used a semi-structured interview

schedule which contained ten questions with follow-up prompts (see *Appendix A)*. Interviews

lasted an average of 47.5 minutes. All participants had a prior relationship with the interviewer,

which was assumed would encourage interviewees to share their subjective experiences most

fully.  The goal of the qualitative interviews was not to assess outcome, but to elicit the participants' interpretation of their own learning processes.  The interviewer was familiar with terms and activities from the course, which was likely to come up in conversation. Lack of this familiarity could prevent an untrained interviewer from understanding subtle points.  GT does not presume the interviewer should be neutral. The goal of this method is to elicit the richest, clearest data from the interviewees.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved procedures were followed for maintaining confidentiality.  Demographic data were stored in a Microsoft Access database and kept separate from interviews and consent forms to maintain confidentiality.  Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for use in presentation.  A digital voice recorder was used to create electronic audio files of the interviews.  These files were then uploaded to iTunes where they could be listened to during transcription.

**Transcription.**  The recorded interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word using a USB-linked foot pedal transcription machine, which allowed frequent pausing and rewinding of the audio files in iTunes.  A detailed transcription scheme (see *Appendix B*) ensured that interviews were transcribed *verbatim* for close analysis (Ochs, 1979).  The goal of this type of transcription is to capture not only participants' statements, but also discursive aspects of the interview conversation such as overlaps, cut-offs, laughter and other meta-linguistic features, which aid analysis and interpretation.  Once interviews were transcribed in this careful manner, the researcher's pre-existing assumptions were less likely to interfere with coding the content of participants' statements.  Qualitative analyses depend on data that carefully maintains the participants' exact wording, in order to best capture their intended meaning.

Once transcribed, the 14 interviews were reviewed for accuracy by a second transcriptionist. Each completed transcript was converted to an .rtf file and uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative database.

**Data Reduction**

GT turn-by-turn coding was used to analyze each transcript. That is, the unit of analysis was a speaker's conversational turn, primarily those of the interviewee. Since many of the interviewer's turns were simply statements displaying active listening ("Okay," "Mmmhmm," etc.), the interviewer's turns were rarely coded. Rather, they were used to mark each formal interview question (highlighting the structure of each interview), as well as follow-up prompts, or the introduction of new concepts. Data analysis was broken into two processes: open coding followed by focused coding (Charmaz, 1995).

**Open Coding.** The initial coding process entailed a close reading of each transcript, followed by systematic recording of the primary content of each turn. This is called *open coding*, the goal of which is to fully capture the various meanings contained in each statement. Participants' turns contained multiple concepts, as expected, each of which was coded with a key word or phrase; the goal was to capture the most important information in a quick but thorough manner (*see Appendix C*), to facilitate theme generation within and across the interviews.

Three independent researchers conducted open coding independently on a subset of the data. Coders were kept blind to each other's coding by having separate databases in Atlas. The principle investigator began coding to create a preliminary code list. Then each coder referred to this master codes list, adding to it as new concepts were encountered in the data. Upon completion, the coded interviews with then compared amongst researchers. Any discrepancies were discussed and clarified until coders agreed on the most appropriate codes for a given turn.

Generally, discrepancies were minor and consisted of terminology differences (e.g., "obstacles" vs. "hindrances," or "option" vs. "choice."). As coders reached consensus, Atlas enabled quick re-coding and refinement.

**Focused Coding.** Focused coding entailed reviewing the master codes list, identifying codes that related to the research question, and then grouping related turns into coherent themes. My research question guided the selection of codes that referred to participants' intentions for taking the course. The codes "intent" and "intention" best captured statements by participants indicating their (initial or current) approaches to practice. Fifty-two speaking turns were coded with "intent" and seven turns were coded with "intention," for a total of 59 relevant turns. These turns were then grouped into coherent themes, as presented below, to address the research question. While the themes generated were mutually exclusive, some turns contributed to more than one sub-theme since they conveyed multiple aspects of the theme into which they were placed.

### Analyses

Three thematic categories emerged from the fifty-nine turns that had been coded as "intent" or "intention" in the *open coding* process. Seventeen turns (drawn from 10 participants) contained statements indicating participants had goal-oriented mindfulness practices. This first theme was labeled, "Doing: Practicing to Achieve." Fifteen turns (drawn from six participants) contained statements indicating participants were deliberately living in a more mindful way. This second theme was labeled "Being: Practicing to Become Mindful." Fourteen turns (drawn from nine participants) contained statements indicating a meta-awareness of participants' own shifting intentions: from practicing in order to achieve a goal, on the one hand, to choosing to be more mindful in their life, on the other. This third theme was labeled, "Shifting Awareness:

From Doing to Being." Sub-themes were then identified within each theme. Themes will be described in depth, incorporating data samples that best convey each theme, and explanations of subthemes, where applicable. The balance of the turns selected for analysis was deemed irrelevant to the research question, so were not included in this analysis.

**Doing: Practicing to Achieve**

The first theme, "Doing: Practicing to Achieve," reflects 17 turns in which participants stated that they were meditating for specific purposes like attaining a result or benefit. In MBSR this is called goal-striving. Some stated that they wanted to escape from stressors such as a medical condition or a taxing work schedule. Four sub-themes were identified in this category: *Obtain Benefits*, *Escape*, *Learn the Right Way, Attain Goal(s)*, as detailed below.

**Obtain Benefits.** The first sub-theme, *Obtain Benefits,* reflects 11 turns in which participants' stated that they expected to gain from taking the MBSR course, based on pre-conceived notions about meditation and personal experiences of self-improvement. The clearest example of this subtheme is when Keith was asked about why he enrolled in MBSR. Keith said, "…there's no pressure um you know it's just completely for ME you know I can show up and um learn something that's really beneficial." This exemplar conveys the essence of most of the turns that fell into this sub-theme: a general sense that practicing mindfulness would be beneficial.

**Escape.** The second sub-theme, *Escape*, reflects six turns in which participants indicated they meditated to escape stressors such as a demanding job, or general life events. The clearest example of this subtheme is when Ann said, "I felt I had too MUCH going on at work (4) and I thought I needed to learn how to manage (.) more without having (.) stress (h, h)." This exemplar

conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: an intention to practice in an effort to avoid some negative aspect of reality.

**Learn the Right Way.** The third sub-theme, *Learn the Right Way,* reflects six turns in which participants conveyed that they were concerned about practicing meditation incorrectly or that there was a specific way of practicing that they struggled to attain. The clearest example of this subtheme is when Linda said:

> I had bought a couple of books on meditation (.) I had bought a couple of CD's on
>
> meditation-- but I didn't feel like I was probably doing IT the right way or getting out of
>
> it what I really wanted out of it.

This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: participants took this course with the intention of learning to practice mindfulness the "correct" way.

**Attain Goal(s).** The fourth sub-theme, *Attain Goal(s),* reflects five turns in which participants stated that they practiced mindfulness in order to attain goals such as reducing blood pressure, reducing stress, controlling racing thoughts, and learning to effectively achieve a tranquil state. The clearest example of this subtheme is when Clare was talking about her high blood pressure, she said, "…and stress makes it worse so so it's like I've got to find a way to reduce my stress and this was what this was about and I said okay you know I need to find something that I can use that'll that'll help um you know cause I I can feel my blood pressure when it goes up." Clare's intention for practicing was to reduce her blood pressure. This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: intentionally practicing in an effort to achieve a goal.

**Being: Practicing to Become Mindful**

The second theme, "Being: Practicing to Become Mindful," reflects 15 turns in which participants talked about being mindful in their daily lives. The data in this theme captured a different intention to practice mindfulness meditation: one that was more about a way of being, than what they would get from practicing. Three sub-themes were identified when these data were examined: *Establishing a Daily Practice, Cultivating Compassion*, and *Developing Curiosity*. These subthemes refer to ongoing lifestyles or ways of perceiving and relating to the world.

**Establishing a Daily Practice.** The first sub-theme, *Establishing a Daily Practice*, reflects 10 turns in which participants conveyed a commitment to practice and the establishment of a daily practice. The clearest example of this subtheme is when Josslyn said:

> Yeah the other thing I do is this self-talk piece (2) Uh very careful about that first
> message I play in the morning (.) when I wake up (.) It's not <vc> OH NO I have to get
> UP I have to go <vc> -- It's <vc> (.) Okay? time to get up? Gonna get to swim now.
> <vc> … So it's it just completely changes everything (.) it makes- it makes [it] very easy
> to bound out of bed and get and get to the pool if you – if you think of it as a negative (2)
> Oh man! It makes it tougher?

This exemplar captures a unique daily practice that Josslyn uses to cultivate mindfulness. Additionally, Josslyn reflected on the positive impact of waking up with a mindful intention verses that of a negative, resentful awakening. This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: an integration of mindfulness practice into daily life.

**Cultivating Compassion.** The second sub-theme, *Cultivating Compassion,* reflects three turns in which participants conveyed an attempt to cultivate compassion or acceptance toward

oneself where they previously had been judging.  The clearest example of this subtheme is when Ann described her habitual reaction to making mistakes, she said:

> I needn't be so harsh on myself when it seems to be part of the human condition y'know?
>
> It's NOT an affliction so to speak but it's part of being human –h so (2) I think I think
>
> that really helped…

Ann's intention here is to generate self-compassion instead of being self-critical.  This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: intentionally being self-compassionate.

**Developing Curiosity.**  The third sub-theme, *Developing Curiosity,* reflects two turns in which participants reported having a novel sense of curiosity in everyday activities.  The clearest example of this subtheme is when Bonnie said:

> Yeah (.) or like even when I'm running now I'm (.) I'm curious of how like (.) like my
>
> body is moving and like how,-h, different muscles ARE (.) like affecting my running ,-h,
>
> and like I realize I like (.) curl my toes:: when I run (h) never noticed that before! (h) it's
>
> kind of weird but (.) mm yeah… yeah! Just (.) yeah general curiosity of (h) I'm a very (.)
>
> MUCH more curious now! (h)

This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: intentionally exploring and inquiring into personal experience.

**Shifting Awareness: Doing to Being.**

The third theme, "Shifting Awareness: Doing to Being," reflects 14 turns in which participants described their meta-awareness of transitioning from initially striving toward goals to a deeper commitment to being mindful in life.  While this theme relates to the first two, it takes a wider view of intentionality because participants are directly describing their own

shifting intention to practice mindfulness.  In these turns, they talked about practicing for the

sake of being mindful. They also explicitly juxtaposed cultivating ongoing mindfulness with

some earlier goal-striving intention.  Several of these turns referred to no longer engaging in

practice solely in order to achieve something. Three sub-themes emerged in this thematic

category: *Noticing Choices, Noticing Change*, and *Redefining Mindfulness.*

**Awareness of Choice.**  The first sub-theme, *Awareness of Choice,* reflects seven turns in

which participants recognized they had a choice in how they could respond to stressors such as

difficult work situations, forgetting to do something, or negative interpersonal encounters.  The

clearest example of this subtheme is Bella's turn, in which she discussed her inconsistent

meditation practice:

> …and then being mad at myself at night for not [meditating] (4) and that I could (5) that I
>
> could just go a little deeper into that and say <vc> oh what— what's stopping you?
>
> What's the BARRIer to actually doing this? <vc> (9) it sort of reminds me that I COULD
>
> be compassionate toward myself... I could aim at myself what I aim at other people.

This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: an awareness of

the option to be more mindful in response to any situation they might habitually judge.

**Awareness of Change.**  The second sub-theme, *Awareness of Change,* reflects four turns

in which participants reported a change in perspective on a particular matter such as changes in

awareness or behaviors toward the self like being more self-compassionate as opposed to

"beating myself up" or changing from being competitive with others to becoming a "better

person."  The clearest example of this subtheme is when Patty said:

> I think striving before was a closed kind of competitive, if you will, striving um (.) so
>
> probably against other people or against other things and now the striving is within me

and it's a (better …) it it's an idea of BOY (.) I could really learn from pursuing

meditation and um in a more intentional way so the striving is is far more personal than

competitive and I don't even think -- it doesn't even feel as if I'm being compet— it's

competitive part of me it's just knowing that there's more (.) knowing that I want to get

there and and uh knowing that I'm open to to trying that.

This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: an awareness of a

change in the speaker's own attitude or behavior, usually toward a more mindful way of being.

**Redefining Mindfulness.** The third sub-theme, *Redefining Mindfulness,* reflects

three turns. In this sub-theme, participants described having a meta-awareness of revising their

underlying definition of mindfulness (or meditation) since first enrolling in the course. The

clearest example of this subtheme is when Kim said:

…I thought meditation was um (2) just about clearing your mind completely… um and

that was one of the pleasant surprises about the course was that defining mindfulness and

and (.) really that it's it's bringing an awareness and that's just much more practical and I

don't know it it made me feel like this this— what I'm doing matters [as] opposed to

trying to to to clear your mind completely and like being I don't know being nothing you

know being or or as if like there are NO problems or something …

This exemplar conveys the essence of most turns that fell into this sub-theme: participants'

revision of their definition of mindfulness meditation during or after the MBSR course.

## Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to explore participants' discussion of shifts in their

intention to practice mindfulness. Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of mindfulness included

intention as one of the mechanisms, yet no research studies have examined participants' reports

of the intentions they bring to MBSR practices.  Exploring 14 semi-structured interviews

conducted with individuals who had previously completed an MBSR course, revealed 993 total

turns. Of these turns, 59 contained participant discourse relating to their intentions to engage in

mindfulness practice.  The analyses presented are a first systematic attempt to develop a theory

about intentionality, rather than rely on MBSR teacher's anecdotal impressions.

Participants made sense of their own intentions to practice mindfulness in three ways.

Some turns revealed that participants had practiced meditation as another form of goal-striving,

to achieve or gain some positive outcome (labeled "Doing: Practicing to Achieve"), while other

practitioners described mindfulness practice as meant to transform their way of being, moment to

moment (labeled "Being: Practicing to Become Mindful").  Still other participant statements

noted a shift from a Doing intention to a Being intention over time (labeled "Shifting Awareness:

From Doing to Being").  Within each of these themes, various subthemes emerged across several

participants, fleshing out variation within a given theme.

Of particular interest to mindfulness researchers is the way that these three themes relate

to the MBSR teachings about goal-striving, reducing reactivity, and enhancing compassion

toward oneself and others.  While these topics are sometimes discussed directly in class, more

often they are only implied in the ways the mindfulness practices are taught.  Yet the themes of

Being and Shifting show how participants have incorporated the essence of mindfulness practice

into their lives, and into the ways they speak about their experience.

As described earlier, the 14 participants in this study were selected from a pool of

volunteers who had completed the MBSR course at a small liberal arts college.  Except for one

participant who identified as a Buddhist, most participants did not have previous knowledge of

mindfulness or meditation practices.  When asked why they initially chose to take the course,

participants sometimes did not have specific reasons other than the idea that the course was supposed to somehow be helpful to them. In the theme, "Doing: Practicing to Achieve," participants' reported practicing in an effort to achieve a goal or escape a negative aspect of reality. Derived as it is from Buddhist Psychology, MBSR seeks to reduce goal-striving since it is ultimately a form of attachment, which leads to suffering. Goal-striving simply maintains the cycle of suffering because participants aim at some outcome in the future or judge their practice negatively; such an intention is not in line with mindfulness as defined in Buddhist psychology. Clearly, participants are primed in our culture to bring a goal-striving attitude toward MBSR and it is important to encourage shifts away from that intention. In contrast, non-striving embodies the original intent of mindfulness teachings, as Shapiro, *et al* (2006) described. Future models of mindfulness should include intentionality as it is integral to understanding mindfulness practice and its effects, and quantitative research studies should include the non-striving intentions within their operational definitions.

The GT approach to participants' reports about their intentions to practice mindfulness allowed a full qualitative examination of these fourteen in-depth interviews. The subjective experience of practitioners' intentionality is clearly a complex concept. Intentionality has been neglected in mindfulness research, but these analyses show it is an important mechanism in developing mindfulness practice after the course ends. Participants' intentions need to be studied further as it is likely that different intentions might differently impact MBSR efficacy.

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    Companies.

Table 1

*Participant Summary*

| ID | Gender | Pseudonym | Age | Occupation |
|----|--------|-----------|-----|------------|
| 101 | M | Jack | 56 | Faculty / Staff |
| 102 | M | Paul | 47 | Faculty / Staff |
| 103 | F | Patty | 56 | Faculty / Staff |
| 104 | F | Clare | 53 | Faculty / Staff |
| 105 | M | Kent | 52 | Faculty / Staff |
| 106 | F | Kim | 23 | Student |
| 107 | M | Keith | 26 | Student |
| 108 | M | Samuel | 21 | Student |
| 109 | M | Kenneth | 21 | Student |
| 110 | F | Bonnie | 21 | Student |
| 111 | F | Ann | 51 | Faculty / Staff |
| 112 | F | Josslyn | 61 | Faculty / Staff |
| 113 | F | Linda | 53 | Faculty / Staff |
| 114 | F | Bella | 53 | Faculty / Staff |

Appendix A

**Participant perceptions following a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program:**

**A qualitative interview study.**

Interview Schedule

3/14/12

Tom Bassarear, Ed.D.

Keene State College, NH

&

Michelle H. Mamberg, Ph.D.

Bridgewater State University, MA

[Warm-up:] Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.  As I start the recording, please make yourself comfortable.

*[Note: all questions may be followed up with the open-ended probe, "Is there anything else you'd like to say about that?" and specific concepts which the Participant mentions may be followed up by the interviewer asking "Can you tell me more about that (or repeat P's own wording)?"]*

**I'd like to start off by discussing your formal and informal mindfulness (MBSR) practice.**

1. **Please first describe your <u>formal</u> practice, currently.**
   Follow-up: **Regarding your formal practice, how often and for how long are you practicing each week?**  (clarify for each formal practice they  mention, if they answer daily, just convert to weekly later.)

[If prompts are needed, define "formal" as structured, guided and/or independent sitting meditation, walking meditation, yoga or body scan; vs. "informal" as everyday mindfulness, such as 3-step breathing space, slowing down, mindful of stop lights, mindful eating, upon waking or going to sleep, etc.]

2. **Now, in regards to your current <u>informal</u> practice, please first talk about anything you do during the day that helps you to stay present or that brings you back to the present.**
   Follow-up:  **And how often (or for how long), on average, do you engage in informal practice in a given week?**

**I'd like to discuss your early experiences with learning to meditate.**

3. **What led you to check out mindfulness meditation initially?**

   [Prompts, if needed: What were your hopes or expectations?]

   a. **What was helpful as you were beginning to learn to meditate?**

   b. **What was frustrating or difficult in this beginning period?**
      Follow-up:  **What helped you to move through that at that time?**

   [Prompt, If not already discussed:] **Some people experience a first burst of excitement when learning to meditate, followed by a plateau period where they feel like they are stuck or just not progressing anymore. Did you experience anything like that?**

   Follow-up:  **If so, what helped you to move through that?**

4. **What aspects of instruction during MBSR class do you recall being most helpful to your learning process?**

   [Prompts: *after they have responded, encouraging elaboration of their answer*]

   Kindness, curiosity, use of poems or stories

   Instruction to "bring attention back"

Other specific imagery or phrases, e.g., "Here anger/sadness sit down beside me."

"Is there anything you recall that did NOT work so well for you?"

**5. Let's discuss your perception of meditation from the time you first learned about it until now.**

    a.  **Tell me as much as you can recall about your initial thoughts regarding what meditation or mindfulness is (or isn't)?**

    b.  **And how do you see it now, what are the biggest <u>changes</u> in your perception of what meditation is and isn't.**

6.  **Overall, what have you learned from meditation practice?**
[Follow-up, if needed: What changes have you noticed in how you meet stress?  Or, Has it changed how you perceive your life or yourself?]

7.  **Thinking about your practice today,**

    a.  **what are your primary challenges in your formal and informal practice lately?**
    b.  **And how are you meeting those challenges?**
[Prompts for formal: regularity of sitting, length of sittings]

[Prompts for informal: applying these practices during the day]

8.  **Do you have any other practices and habits which you find support or complement your meditation practice?**

9.  **As a result of learning mindfulness meditation, have you noticed any changes in your compassion toward yourself or toward others?**

**10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about learning to meditate or about your practice, generally?**


**Thank you once again for sharing your experiences with us.** [wrap up, stop recording]

Appendix B

# Transcription Scheme

Dr. Mamberg's Self-In-Talk Lab

Updated, 9/12/13

*Rev'd 3/11/13*

| Symbol | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Identify speakers** | | |
| I: | Interviewer; *Note: one tab after colon before speech.* | I:    How regularly do you engage in formal meditation practice? |
| P: | Participant *(1 tab after)* | P:    I really have found meditation very empowering. |
| **Stressed Speech** | | |
| CAPS | Amplified speech; usually single word or syllable of a word louder than surrounding speech. | P:    I found it VERY helpful |
| :: | Lengthened syllables | P:    I re::ally did not like the body scan |
| ? | Rising intonation, raised pitch (not a punctuation mark). | P:    and how much I care for my family? |
| ! | Stressed / exclaimed utterance followed by pause. | P:    And then wham! it just hit me |
| **Pause Length** | | |
| (.) | Just noticeable pause (untimed, ~ 1 sec.) | P: (.) I think I think it was the support of my family |
| (#) | Timed Pause, given in seconds (>1 sec). | P:    Well (4) I don't know, it's hard to explain |
| . | Full stop, falling intonation contour (ending) | P: I just found myself sitting and watching the sun set. |
| **Interruptions / Overlaps** | | |
| -- | Truncation, self-editing marker where speaker stops abruptly, either to interrupt self or yielding to other. | T:    So, I was wondering -- if you don't mind me asking |
| … | Trailing off. | P:    I was going to do it but… |
| [  ] | Placed at beginning and end of verbal overlap | P:    I meditate [and find--]<br>T:                [How often] do you meditate? |

| **Meta-transcription Comments** | | |
|---|---|---|
| (*text*) | Inaudible words; guess at words | P: I think (*my*) whole, my (*family*) is |
| ( ) | Unintelligible speech, transcriber unable to guess | P: I meditate once (   ) but not as often as I would like |
| [ ] | Non-lexical action which interrupts the text (e.g., [cough] or [knocking]) | T: So tell me more about that [cough] experience |
| <vc> | Voice change; usually indicates speaker is mimicking or quoting someone else – place at beginning and end of stretch of talk that differs from speaker's normal voice | P: So she was like <vc> WHAT?! You so CRAzy! <vc> and so I said… |
| **Audible Breathing** | | |
| , -h, | Inspiration (In-breath) or any breath (can't discern in vs. out), set off with commas | P: This is hard to talk about, –h, I guess it really bothered me |
| , h, | Aspiration (Out-breath), set off with commas | P: What a relief, h, that was something I had trouble with |
| (h) | Small laugh, chuckle; Note: can be placed within a word, as well | T: (h) It sounds like that was quite an exper(h)ience |
| (h, h) | Laughter | P: I was walking to class when I saw it (h,h) |

## Appendix C

I:      so the next question is what about your informal practice                          QUES2

P:      yeah that's um (.) I--I think if there's a real success from as far as I'm concerned I put more informal meditation into     Breath
        my day than formal meditation if you will um I find myself breathing a lot uh in meetings after meetings um the put        Informal
        people on hold uh thing that I do                                                  Interaction~
                                                                                           work

I:      uh huh

P:      um just to it's ah it really helps me uh have a (cross) for my desk a what did you do today inhale exhale that you gave     Breath
        us and I look at that a lot I mean when I'm just doing stuff and I look up so I will when things are are zooming around     busy
        and stuff like that I'll just take time and like I'll walk to um to different places and I'll just breathe just concentrate on   Informal
        my breathing and it really I do that a lot do that in traffic do that eh all over the place ( when I'm ) racing to work and   To Do Today sign
        some guy there an I'm like okay breathe you don't kill yourself you pass him you're going to go off the road breathe        traffic
        you'll get there in a couple of minutes so that's a real huge difference                                                   walk
                                                                                                                                    work

I:      mmm

P:      huge difference not that I was wound up but just it just makes the experience so much mellower

I:      right

P:      you know and my ninety-year old mother now lives with us she moved in in September um lovely love her very and             Breath