Letter to the Editor

Van Dam, Nicholas T; van Vugt, Marieke; Vago, David R; Schmalzl, Laura; Saron, Clifford D; Olendzki, Andrew; Meissner, Ted; Lazar, Sara W; Gorchov, Jolie; Fox, Kieran C R

Published in:
Perspectives on Psychological Science

DOI:
10.1177/1745691620924057

Publication date:
2020

aps ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

Letter to the Editor: Miscommunicating Mindfulness

Perspectives on Psychological Science
2020, Vol. 15(5) 1289–1290

DOI: 10.1177/1745691620924057
www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS
SAGE

To the Editor:

In our article regarding news-media "hype" about results from research on meditation and mindfulness, some work by the author Rick Hanson was inadvertently mischaracterized. Specifically, we (Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 50) quoted from his book *Hardwiring Happiness*, asserting:

> . . . in what is presumably an effort to explain how meditation has been shown to influence emotion regulation, correlated with alterations in amygdala activity (e.g., Goldin & Gross, 2010), [Hanson] has stated, "In terms of amygdala activity, people seem to belong to one of three groups . . . the ones with a joyful amygdala—are more focused on promoting the good than on preventing the bad" (Hanson, 2013, pp. 43–44). As a result of such oversimplifications, meditative benefits may be exaggerated and undue societal urgency to undertake mindfulness practices may be encouraged (e.g., Farias & Wikholm, 2015).

However, Hanson informed us subsequently that his book is about socio-emotional learning and that the above statement taken from it actually concerns individual differences in approach orientation and their potential neurological factors, rather than being about mindfulness and meditation per se. Furthermore, according to him, he was summarizing research by Cunningham, Raye, and Johnson (2005; Cunningham et al. 2012; Cunningham & Kirkland, 2013) that found a subgroup of people whose amygdalae were more sensitive to positive than to negative stimuli. The term "joyful amygdala" came originally from Cunningham and Kirkland (2013), not from Hanson (R. Hanson, personal communication, May 16, 2019).

In response to the personal communication from Hanson, we want to make the following points of clarification:

Our original intent was not to suggest that the selected excerpt from *Hardwiring Happiness* (Hanson, 2013) or that the book as a whole urges the public to undertake mindfulness or meditation practice. Instead, we were trying to provide an example of how oversimplifications of scientific results may obscure their underlying complexities and may compel individuals to seek out mindfulness and/or meditation. Academics, including us, are also guilty of such oversimplifications on occasion—indeed, in the present case, Hanson's oversimplification was inspired by a naming convention from Cunningham and colleagues (cf. Cunningham & Kirkland, 2013). Given the aforementioned matter, it would have been more appropriate for us to have quoted instead from a popular book on mindfulness (e.g., *Buddha's Brain;* Hanson, 2009) or to have considered the large number of academic, popular, and press articles that manifest more direct evidence of oversimplifications. There are complex issues associated with critiques of any literature, and we did not intend for the credibility of a single author to be questioned.

We regret our preceding putative misconstrual and any confusion that may have stemmed from it. More discussion needs to occur among all concerned parties to ensure that such oversimplifications do not lead to unreasonable expectations. Academics and scientists have an important role to play in this regard. It behooves us to ensure that we neither intentionally nor unintentionally mislead journalists, writers, and the public. It also behooves popular-science writers and journalists to check that their information is factually accurate, not oversimplified, and not solely the opinion or subjective position of a single scientist or scientific group.

Nicholas T. Van Dam
Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences
University of Melbourne

Marieke van Vugt
Institute of Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Engineering
University of Groningen

David R. Vago
Osher Center for Integrative Medicine
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Corresponding Author:
Nicholas Van Dam, Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, 12th Floor, Redmond Barry Building, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia
E-mail: ntvandam@gmail.com

Laura Schmalzl
College of Science and Integrative Health
Southern California University of Health Sciences

Clifford D. Saron
Center for Mind and Brain
University of California, Davis

Andrew Olendzki
Mindfulness Studies
Lesley University

Ted Meissner
Mindfulness Practice Center
Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

Sara W. Lazar
Department of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School

Jolie Gorchov
Blanton Peale Institute & Counseling Center
New York, New York

Kieran C. R. Fox
Department of Neurology and Neurological Services
Stanford University

Brent A Field
Princeton Neuroscience Institute
Princeton University

Willoughby Britton
Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior
Warren Alpert Medical School at Brown University

Julie Brefczynski-Lewis
Center for Neuroscience
West Virginia University

David E. Meyer
Department of Psychology
University of Michigan

Transparency

Action Editor: Laura A. King
Editor: Laura A. King
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Nicholas Van Dam https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1131-0739
Willoughby Britton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2983-0863

References

Cunningham, W. A., & Brosch, T. (2012). Motivational salience: Amygdala tuning from traits, needs, values, and goals. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *21*, 54–59.

Cunningham, W. A., & Kirkland, T. (2013). The joyful, yet balanced, amygdala: Moderated responses to positive but not negative stimuli in trait happiness. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *9*, 760–766.

Cunningham, W. A., Raye, C. L., & Johnson, M. K. (2005). Neural correlates of evaluation associated with promotion and prevention regulatory focus. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, *5*, 202–211.

Hanson, R. (2009). *Buddha's brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love, and wisdom*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Hanson, R. (2013). *Hardwiring happiness: The new brain science of contentment, calm, and confidence*. New York, NY: Harmony Books.

Van Dam, N. T., van Vugt, M. K., Vago, D. R., Schmalzl, L., Saron, C. D., Olendzki, A., . . . Meyer, D. E. (2018). Mind the hype: A critical evaluation and prescriptive agenda for research on mindfulness and meditation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *13*, 36–61. doi:10.1177/1745691617709589