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Mindful Evaluation: Cultivating Our Ability to Be Reflexive and Self-Aware

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Background: Mindfulness, giving our full attention to what we are doing in the present moment, is perhaps best understood as training for the brain. When we are mindful, we are actively engaged with our thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of "mindful evaluation" as a way to cultivate our reflexivity and self-awareness to improve our evaluation practice. Mindful evaluation is an invitation to be more intentional and reflexive about our ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions in general as well as for each evaluation we undertake.

Setting: Mindfulness has been gaining popularity both with the general public and a variety of professional disciplines thanks in large part to the growing body of research on its efficacy. As disciplines such as healthcare, economics, and education are incorporating the benefits of mindfulness in their work, we explore how we too might use the principles of mindfulness in evaluation and evaluation practice.

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Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable

Findings: We present simple steps for incorporating the principles of mindfulness to how we approach evaluation.

Keywords: *mindfulness; reflective practice; evaluator competence.*

Mindfulness, giving our full attention to what we are doing in the present moment, has been gaining popularity both with the general public and a variety of professional disciplines thanks in large part to the growing body of research on its efficacy. In addition to physical benefits such as reduced stress and lowered blood pressure, mindfulness offers substantial—and empirically supported—cognitive benefits. This article explores how we might apply general principles of mindfulness to our evaluation practice as a way to cultivate reflexivity and self-awareness. As with reflective practice, mindfulness invites us to fully consider our ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions for each evaluation we undertake. When we conduct evaluation mindfully, we avoid operating on autopilot by giving careful attention to *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and *how* we are doing it.

Although it originates in the Eastern tradition and philosophy of meditation and contemplation, mindfulness as discussed in this (evaluation) context is strictly secular. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn (2014, pg. 36), a molecular biologist by training and the person credited with popularizing mindfulness in the West, "mindfulness is not a special state you achieve through a trick or a technique. It is a way of being." In the literature, mindfulness is presented as a theoretical construct, a type of awareness, specific meditation practices, and psychological processes such as self-regulation, metacognition, and acceptance (Chambers, Gullone, & Allen, 2009)—the underlying thread throughout is the awareness of the present moment. When we are mindful, we are neither worrying about the future nor ruminating the past, which frees us to be wholly engaged in the present.

Training in mindfulness ranges from practices that people can take up individually or collectively, as part of a structured training program or just an informal gathering. Most mindfulness practices entail sustained focus on something: our breath, our bodies, or even sounds in the room. When attention wavers, a thought arises, or a distraction emerges, the thought or distraction should be acknowledged yet nonjudgmentally dismissed. When we do this, we assume the role of observer of our own thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. We switch from a first person to a third person narrative, and we do so in a nonjudgmental way.

Mindfulness has been gaining increased popularity in recent years since the 1990s when it showed promise in the treatment of chronic pain. It is the subject of numerous books, articles, a monthly magazine, and even received front cover billing and a lengthy article in the February 3, 2014, issue of *Time* magazine and in a special report chronicling Anderson Cooper's experience with mindfulness in a December 2014 broadcast of CBS News "60 Minutes." An annual conference focusing on the intersection of mindfulness and technology, Wisdom 2.0, draws together technology leaders, neuroscientists, and the general public to explore the role of mindfulness in contemporary life and business. At the 2014 Wisdom 2.0 conference, Ariana Huffington declared that 2013 was the year that CEOs came out of the closet (she was, of course, referring to their meditation practices). These CEOs are not only cultivating their own personal practices but providing opportunities for their employees to do so as well. Indeed, increasing numbers of companies are trying to harness the benefits of mindfulness. For example, Google has created an in-house mindfulness program, Search Inside Yourself, designed to help their employees become more self-aware and to encourage creativity and innovation. The military has launched mindfulness programs to help active duty enlisted personnel and veterans cope with stress. As disciplines such as healthcare, economics, and education are incorporating the benefits of mindfulness in their work, in this article we explore how we too might use the principles of mindfulness in evaluation and evaluation practice.

Need for Mindfulness in Evaluation

In an April 2014 forum piece in the *American Journal of Evaluation*, Michael Quinn Patton outlined a framework for integrating theory and practice (i.e., making sense and taking action) based on work from the field of brain science, for when faced with complexity "we fall back on a set of rules and standard operating procedures that predetermine what we will do, that effectively short-circuit situational adaptability (p. 237)." Patton argues that to become more intentional and deliberate in evaluation situation recognition and decision-making, we need to be more reflexive, or in other words, "to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of our own perspective and voice as well of the voices of those with whom we engage. (p.243)" According to Patton, "reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to

whom one reports. To be reflexive, then, is to undertake an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it."

Most evaluators, while although recognizing that there is no such thing as value free science as we impose our personal values from the moment we identify research questions, strive for objectivity and do our best to establish measures to reduce bias. Yet, despite our best intentions and efforts to limit the effect of our personal perspectives, our minds operate in ways that undercut these efforts. The fields of social psychology, brain sciences, and decision sciences have discovered that humans tend to respond in the same predictable patterns, namely those with which we are familiar and have experience. When faced with complexity, i.e., almost all evaluations, we break things down into more manageable components relying on heuristics that are not always valid.

In the 1970s, social scientists tended to view humans as rational beings, and attributed deviations from rational behavior to the byproduct of emotions. Nobel Prize winner in Economics Daniel Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky (1974) challenged that notion by documenting normal peoples' systematic errors in thinking and traced these errors to "the design of the machinery of cognition rather than to the corruption of thought by emotion (Kahneman, 2011, pg. 8)." Their work on heuristics and biases is widely accepted and has been introduced into many disciplines, helping to shine light on why and how people make seemingly irrational decisions. In the following section, we present some examples of the types of biases and heuristics that can undermine sound decision-making.

The representative heuristic

People tend to focus on information that is the most familiar and matches what they already know, overlooking evidence that doesn't fit their preconceptions. This is why some evaluators tend to use the same methodological approach in every instance, even if it is not necessarily the most appropriate or effective. This helps explain why some evaluators favor participatory approaches even when the time for the evaluation is short, trust between stakeholders is poor, and the upstream stakeholders want to call all of the shots—in other words, when the context is not at all conducive to participatory evaluation. But if evaluators have spent a lot of time studying participatory evaluation and have used it in other instances, when considering a new evaluation they will focus on aspects that seem familiar and choose to use a participatory approach despite clear signs contradicting its use.

The availability heuristic

People make judgments based on how easily information comes to mind. In Kahneman and Tversky's well-known experiment, subjects were read a list of famous people of both males and females and were later asked if the list had more female or male names. As part of the experiment, different lists were read to different groups of subjects alternating between more well-known men and well-known women. Invariably, the results were the same—whichever gender had more famous people were misjudged by subjects as being more numerous. Using an evaluation example, when stakeholders are asked to report on program impacts they are likely to recall the most vivid or memorable events. While those events might be valid, they might not be indicative of the program as a whole and might exclude less notable but still important impacts.

Sleeper effect

The notion of the sleeper effect from social psychology has shown us that people are more discerning about the credibility of explanations initially. Over time they forget the precise details and make generalizations (Langer, 1997). For example, a principal asked to comment on a class with low test scores might report that they are poor performers, forgetting that their teacher was on maternity leave and a long-term substitute was not found.

Halo effect

We tend to like or dislike everything about a person—including things we have not observed. For example, suppose you met evaluator John Smith at last year's AEA conference, thought he was a nice person and found him attractive (physical attractiveness contributes to our sense of likability). He gave a presentation on his work as a methodologist for a government study on the Common Core curriculum. Now you are asked to bring in a consultant to serve as a developmental evaluator for a program providing services to an elderly population. John Smith's name comes to mind. Does it make sense to consider him for this consultancy? Based on the information provided, there isn't any evidence that would indicate that John Smith has expertise with developmental

evaluation. Because of the halo effect, you extended the positive feelings you had from your initial meeting and are now predisposed to believe he has skills with developmental evaluation.

Anchoring effect

People are unduly influenced by the first piece of information that is presented to them. The classic example is in buying a home; offers are made in relation to the list price. To surmount anchoring effects in evaluation, you might, for instance, when interviewing students about number of hours spent studying for a test, ask them to provide their best guess rather than anchor them with a number as a point of comparison (e.g., was it more or less than five hours?). Or, if determining willingness to pay, ask directly what they would pay rather than giving a specific amount that would serve as an anchor.

As a final comment on the need for mindful evaluation, we are living in a time that is extraordinarily fast-paced, when busyness, multitasking, and efficiency seem valued above all else. Given competing demands for our attention, we need to give ourselves permission to slow down and be contemplative. Mindfulness is a reminder to do just that—to be aware and reflexive on the present moment. Mindful evaluation invites us to consider our underlying beliefs, perceptions, and understandings of the content and context of our work.

How Mindfulness Works

Mindfulness has four primary components: attention regulation, body awareness, emotion regulation, and change in perspective of self (Holzel et al., 2011). During mindfulness meditation, practitioners focus their attention for extended periods of time during which they acknowledge and set aside distraction. Over time, they develop attention regulation, or the capacity to sustain attention both during and outside of meditation. Frequent meditators report greater awareness and attunement of body sensations and emotions. This heightened awareness allows meditators to interact with their emotions in a different way. They begin to accept their emotions as they are, without judgment, and avoid internal reactivity. All of these mechanisms combine to create a meta-awareness for meditators, providing greater insight and clarity into their own mental processes.

Shauna Shapiro and colleagues (2006) outlined a model of mindfulness that focuses on three primary axioms: intention, attention, and attitude (IAA). Having a personal vision for what we want to get out of our mindfulness practice is important—in fact, the authors' research showed that outcomes correlated with intentions. Mindfulness is all about paying attention, whether to our breath or a particular body part or even noises in the room. We do so because we are cultivating our ability to pay attention: to one object for a long period of time, to switch between objects at will, and to disregard distractors. And we need to approach our mindfulness practice with the right attitude. It is not enough that we do it, how we do it matters as well. The authors argue that it is important that we enter into our mindfulness practice with curiosity and compassion and without judgment.

Ellen Langer, professor of psychology at Harvard University, defines mindfulness as a "process of stepping back from both perceived problems and perceived solutions to view situations as novel." A mindful approach is one that continuously creates new categories, is open to new information, and is aware of multiple perspectives (Langer, 1997). She contrasts this with mindlessness, or operating on autopilot (Langer, 1992). Most people don't have to look too hard to find evidence of this in their lives—much of our daily routines are so familiar that we often go through the motions without much attention to what we are actually doing. We arrive at work with only the vaguest sense of how we got there. We edit a report without reading and understanding what it says. Our culture tends to place value on the ability to do things by routine. According to Langer (2014), when we aren't fully engaged or aware of what we are doing, we aren't as sensitive to context and perspective and have reduced performance. Adopting a mindful approach requires us to not only view each situation as unique but to actively think

Mindfulness and Wellbeing

While the full benefits of mindfulness are still emerging in ongoing research—there are currently 126 open clinical trials in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) database—its efficacy has been demonstrated in three primary domains. Mindfulness meditation has been linked to a whole range of physical benefits including decreased blood pressure (Carlson, Speca, Faris, & Patel, 2007), increases in the rate of skin clearing of psoriasis patients (Kabat-Zinn, Wheeler, Light, Skillings, Scharf, Cropley, & Bernhard, 1998), chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982), and immune

functioning (Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, Muller, Santorelli, & Sheridan, 2003). Research has also demonstrated substantial mental health benefits of mindfulness in treating diverse issues such as stress (Williams, Kolar, Reger, & Pearson, 2001 & Johnson, Thom, Stanley, Haase, Simmons, Pei-an, & Paulus, 2014), depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2012), anxiety (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010), substance abuse (Bowen, Witkiewitz, Dillworth, Chawla, Simpson, Ostafin, & Marlatt, 2006), and eating disorders (Kristeller, & Hallett, 1999). Even more promising are studies that present the greatest possibilities for evaluators and evaluation practice, the cognitive benefits of mindfulness, including boosts to working memory (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010), reduced mind wandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013), more cognitive flexibility (Moore, & Malinowski, 2009), and less emotional reactivity (Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007).

It is the last group of benefits from mindfulness, those pertaining to cognitive and emotional benefits, that have the most relevance and applicability to evaluators and evaluator practice. Mindfulness is often called "exercise for the mind," and like developing our triceps and quads, we are strengthening our brain muscle. It turns out that there is a lot of truth to this. Whenever we engage in something over and over again, our brain changes. This is referred to as neuroplasticity. It means that the neurons change how they interact (Schwartz & Begley, 2002; Davidson et al., 2003; Treadway & Lazar, 2010). Scientists have done studies and actually found differences in the brain between meditators and non-meditators, including increases in gray matter and cortical thickness (Lazar et al., 2005; Grant, Courtemanche, Duerden, Duncan, & Rainville, 2010). In mindfulness, we are practicing focusing our attention on one thing—be it our breath, a thought, a sound, an image—over a long period of time. Research has demonstrated that mindfulness is helpful in improving our ability to concentrate (Valentine & Sweet, 1999), to eliminate distraction (Jain, Shapiro, Swanick, Roesch, Mills, Bell, & Schwartz, 2007) and to reduce mind wandering (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010; Mrazek Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013). We increase our cognitive flexibility (Davis, Strasburger, & Brown, 2007), develop our ability to focus deeply on one thing at a time (Moore & Malinowski, 2009), and cultivate our ability to notice many things happening around us at the same time (Siegel, 2007). We start to recognize our personal biases and preconceived notions (Bishop et al., 2004). We develop greater emotional awareness, recognizing our own feelings as well as those of others (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Phillipot, & Segal, 2009). We become better listeners, including being better attuned to what is both said and not said (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998; Ucok, 2006).

Seven Steps to Mindful Evaluation

How can we use these findings about how our brains work to improve our decision-making processes? The fields of education and academic learning have been trying to do just that in their work on metacognition, or awareness of one's own knowledge (Center, T. E. A. L., 2010). Developmental psychologist John Flavell (1979) led the research on metacognition by focusing on two areas: awareness and regulation. Self-awareness refers to the learner's understanding of what he/she knows, including strengths and weaknesses. Self-regulation refers to the learner's ability to control his/her learning through planning and evaluating progress. By studying and applying metacognitive strategies, learners are better able to achieve success in their cognitive endeavors (Livingston, 2003). Psychologists developed Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (Teasdale, 1999), MBCD, as a strategy to help prevent relapse in recurrent depression by helping people to de-center (i.e., accepting thoughts and feelings as impermanent) and focus on what is actually happening, rather than what they want or fear to be true (Teasdale, J. D., (1999), Teasdale, J. D., Williams, J. M. G., & Segal, Z. V., (2014)).

We believe that incorporating the principles of mindfulness into evaluation practice is a way to cultivate reflexivity and self-awareness to improve our decision-making ability and evaluation practice. For the purposes of clarity, mindful evaluation isn't a specific method, but rather an invitation to be deeply aware and present in all stages of the evaluation process. When we do so, we bring focused attention and awareness to *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and *how* we are doing it. What follows is an overview of simple but effective steps for a more mindful approach to evaluation.

Set the intention

The first (most basic) and most important step is to set the intention to be more mindful. Having a personal vision for what we want to get out of our mindfulness practice is important—in fact, research shows that outcomes correlate with intentions (Shapiro, 1992). So, make a choice to be

more mindful. This is a choice that you are making for yourself and for your evaluation practice. Continue to remind yourself of this decision, remembering that as with anything it takes time to make progress. Scheduling or setting aside a dedicated time to practice mindfulness or to engage in reflexive inquiry (see below) is a simple but often effective way of realizing your intention.

Bring full attention

Attention is the keystone to mindfulness. We practice mindfulness by focusing attention on something: our thoughts, our emotions, or even noises in the room. We do so because we are cultivating our ability to pay attention: to one object for a long period of time, to switch between objects at will, and to disregard distractors. Give yourself the time to practice mindfulness, either through meditation or by adopting a sense of curiosity and openness. One easy way to do this might simply be to recognize when you are multi-tasking and then doing just one thing at a time. Minimize distraction—when you are writing a report or analyzing data, do just that. Don't have 20 browsers open; and shut off alerts so you are not distracted and check every time someone posts on your Facebook wall or you receive an e-mail. During meetings, decide not look at your cell phone and instead bring your full and undivided attention to what is transpiring in the room.

Become aware

People who practice mindfulness report greater awareness and attunement of body sensations and emotions. This heightened awareness allows you to interact with your emotions in a different way. You begin to accept your emotions as they are without judgment and avoid internal reactivity. All of these mechanisms combine to create a meta-awareness, providing greater insight and clarity into your own mental processes. Bring this awareness to your evaluation practice, focusing on what is working and what is not. Track methods and approaches that are particularly successful. Build on these—don't just repeat them—going forward. Returning again to Patton's (2015) call, "be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports." Interestingly, consciously recognizing and acknowledging your personal perspective helps reduce (not increase) subjectivity and bias.

Practice or cultivate self-reflexivity

To be reflexive, ask yourself questions like, What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What does this remind me of and why? What is my true motivation? Do I have preconceived ideas? What are my intended goals? Ask yourself questions about your ontological perspective: What do I think know? What is my truth?; your methodological perspective: What do I think are the best ways for collecting data?; your epistemological perspective: How do I think that I know what I know? How do I make meaning or knowledge? This line of inquiry should help surface your underlying thoughts and perspectives and also help mitigate the biases discussed earlier. At each stage of the evaluation process, question what you are doing and why you are doing it. Actively seek out the rationale for your behaviors. Actively seek out the rationale for the behavior of others. Consider their perspective and what has shaped their ontology and epistemology.

Practice deep listening

Most of us don't spend too much time thinking about how we interact with others. Sometimes our professional training affects how we interact with others. For example, as part of their formation, attorneys are taught how to prepare and deliver legal arguments. In the courtroom when the opposing side is presenting, attorneys are listening for apparent flaws and weaknesses that they can use to their advantage. Instead of entering from a point of curiosity and inquiry, they are there to win their argument. When the other side is talking, they are busy crafting their response. In reality, this practice of listening in order to respond with a counter argument is not limited to lawyers but is frequently a very human way of listening. We have found that as evaluators, often our training in social science methods kicks us into autopilot. We start to code, analyze, and report on what we are hearing while the other person is talking. This can be helpful in reducing the amount of time we spend later in analysis, but it interferes with our ability to fully listen. When we set aside distractions and really focus on the person with whom we are talking, we are able to connect emotionally with them in ways that can deepen our understanding and benefit our evaluation practice (Weng et al., 2013). Studies have shown that empathy helps us connect with other people's neural activity (Carr et al., 2003). When we are

good listeners, people are more honest and share more.

Stay curious and open

As parents of young children, we are keenly aware of the curiosity of youth and their quest to understand how the world works. Remember this youthful passion and inclination to questioning everything as you practice staying curious and open. Don't do things the way you have always done them and mindlessly operate on autopilot. Question *what* you are doing, *why* you are doing it, and *how* you are doing it. Try and stay open to novel ideas and approaches, different perspectives, and to the unfolding of the present moment. Approach your mindfulness practice with the right attitude. Again, it is not enough that we do it, how we do it matters as well. It is important that we enter into our mindfulness practice with curiosity and compassion and without judgment of self or others.

Suspend judgment

Evaluation is all about judgment—evaluative judgments that are based on quality evidence and standards. However as stated previously, human beings tend to form opinions based on personal biases and preconceived ideas. By bringing mindfulness to our evaluations, you examine your motivations, recognize that you have an opinion/bias, set that bias/judgment aside, seek out alternative hypotheses, ask clarifying questions, gather evidence, and then make an evaluative judgment knowing that you took measures to mitigate your biases.

Parting Thoughts

This article is meant to spark conversation about how we can become more intentional and reflexive with our evaluation practice. We are offering what we call mindful evaluation, incorporating the principles of mindfulness to how we approach evaluation, as a possible strategy to increase awareness of our thoughts, actions, and motivations. We encourage evaluators to seriously consider how they conduct evaluation. We believe that reflective practice will help us to better understand how and why we as evaluators do what we do. It is our hope that this article could serve as an invitation for further dialogue and discourse on ways to develop reflexivity and awareness in evaluation practice. We encourage being patient with ourselves. Mindfulness is a way of being, not solely a technique, and it requires constant practice. There is no magic pill that will make us mindful evaluators, but our intention, awareness, and practice are part and parcel of our daily life and work.

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