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Observations on the Relationship between Resilience and Mindfulness

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In the last three decades, mindfulness and resilience have received extensive scholarly attention. Research has burgeoned and they have both become "buzz words" in the social sciences and mental health fields. That said, they are often presented as unrelated qualities, skills, or states, and few studies and texts have examined their linkages and/or how they complement each other. Masten's (2001, 2009) seminal papers and subsequent book (2014) that presented resilience as "ordinary magic" have had large impacts on resilience scholarship, bringing forth that resilience is much more of a common human occurrence and proclivity than previously considered. In this paper, we explore the potential for mindfulness to be a potentially overlooked and ubiquitous protective factor in the development and maintenance of resilience. To achieve this, we propose that mindfulness is fundamental to resilience by investigating linkages between mindfulness and resilience yet to be thoroughly explored in the literature, and discuss how mindfulness is logically connected to resilience. Likewise, we suggest that the complementary interplay between mindfulness and resilience is readily applicable and highly germane, as mindfulness may beget resilience and vice versa.

KEYWORDS: resilience, mindfulness, present-focus, flexibility, awareness

Primary Conceptualizations of Resilience and Mindfulness

Professionals in mental health and the prevention and intervention sciences are focused on assisting individuals, families, and communities in dealing well with adversity, in effect, demonstrating resilience. As such, there is substantial focus on isolating and then teaching those strategies that can be mobilized to deal well with this adversity. Among those strategies receiving attention is mindfulness, which quite possibly resides in us all but which is not necessarily activated. Knowing more about the nature of resilience, as well as more about how mindfulness can support it, has clear implications for prevention and intervention science, that is, for programs and services that ultimately help individuals, families, and communities thrive. Not surprisingly there are more questions and vagaries, than there are answers and certainties when it comes to resilience and to mindfulness. In the current discussion we present our thinking on these important matters as grist for the mill.

On the Nature of Resilience

We first note, almost as a disclaimer of sorts, there is now a substantial literature on resilience as it involves individual and family well-being. Consequently, encapsulating this literature in a few words is challenging. Nevertheless, in this discussion we do cover some highlights of this literature, and in particular several overarching frameworks of relevance.

First off, resilience cannot be effectively understood unless adversity is also identified, otherwise it is difficult to know how resilience plays out, or how certain individuals and families do well in the face of adversity and others do not (Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2017). Second, it is difficult to mark two very important timeline-related dimensions for understanding resilience, one being the assessment of a baseline prior to the adversity occurring, and the second being the return to baseline or the surpassing of the baseline at some point later. Yet we will see that definitions of resilience assume we have resolved these matters as we move on to prevention and intervention.

In general, resilience researchers aim to grasp how individuals, families, and communities successfully overcome risk or adversity to accomplish favorable outcomes (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Mancini & Bowen, 2009) and succeed. While many become ruptured by a particular crisis or persistent stressor, remarkably many grow stronger and more resourceful as a result (Boss, 2006; Ungar, 2004, 2012, 2016; Walsh, 2015). Resilience demarcates this human potential and predilection for recuperation and growth in the face of significant hardship or adversity.

Boss (2013) defined resilience as the "ability to bounce back to a level of functioning equal to *or greater than* before the stress or trauma" (p. 287). This implies a full recovery from significant adversity to one's previous baseline in functioning, and possible additional growth and transformation above one's previous baseline, as a result. Resilience also implies malleability and adaptation in response to a specific stressor, or the general inevitable stressors of life. A pattern of growing stronger from adversity has been found to be "ordinary," present across many different countries, time periods, and cultures, hence Masten's important idea of "ordinary magic." (Masten, 2014). That said, growth from adversity may not be necessary to denote resilience (Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2017; Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Walsh, 2015). The resilience literature is of two minds as it involves what occurs post-adversity. Is resilience about the return to baseline or a new level of functioning beyond baseline? That question remains open.

Walsh (2015) employed the following metaphor of using physical structures to explicate how resilience functions: after an earthquake, it is fundamental to not only examine the shattered buildings, but also those that successfully endured the debris and are still standing tall. This enables researchers to unearth key facets of resilience and use these facets to forge additional similarly resilient structures in the future. The current literature suggests that central qualities associated with resilience are the ability to engender meaning from adverse experiences and sustain a hopeful outlook among others described below. We think the resilience framework promulgated by Walsh (2013) has great merit for considering links between mindfulness and resilience. In the Walsh framework there are nine elements: belief systems, positive outlook, transcendence and spirituality, flexibility, connectedness, social and economic resources, clear and consistent messages, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving. While we do not have the luxury of a deep discussion of the Walsh framework, we do note that one theme running throughout the framework involves what individuals actually do in wrestling with adversity, whether it involves how they define the adversity itself, their optimism in general about the future, or how they interact with important others in their lives. As our discussion here unfolds, it will be evident that elements of mindfulness map on quite well with the understanding of resilience, including mechanisms that may foster it.

A second important resilience framework, with more of a developmental perspective, was developed by Masten (2014). Not incidentally, as a result of Masten's program of research, as well as her take on the resilience research of others, she referred to resilience as "ordinary magic", which we will consider as potentially applying to mindfulness. In brief, Masten discussed resilience factors and adaptive systems as they involved resilience among young people. So

adaptive systems include attachment (with regard to family, social networks, and peers), central nervous system-related learning and thinking and self-regulation, and mastery, among others. As to resilience factors associated with those systems she identified, for example, effective caregiving and parenting, close relationships with other adults, having self-control and being planful, and self-efficacy, among other factors (see Masten, 2014, p. 148 for a full discussion). There are touchpoints between this way of thinking about resilience and mindfulness as a strategy, as it involves the clarity of mindfulness and resilience factors such as establishing close relationships, effective problem-solving, and mastery, as a few examples.

On the Nature of Mindfulness

Mindfulness comes from the word *sati* of the Pali language, literally translated as "to remember," and represents presence of mind. It originates from the central activities of consciousness, namely attention and awareness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Awareness refers to the intentional noticing of what is coming in through the body's five senses, as well as the activities of the mind. It has been specifically defined as paying attention nonjudgmentally to the present moment without habitually and automatically reacting (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005). Interestingly, the father of psychology, William James, also emphasized one's ability to bring attention back to the present when the mind wanders (James, Burkhardt, Bowers, & Skrupskelis, 1890). We spend most of our mental lives focusing on what happened in the past or what can happen in the future, which can keep our nervous system unnecessarily aroused (Seigel, 2009). Mindfulness, on the other hand, directly relaxes our nervous system into the present, the only place temporally that peace, pleasure, happiness, joy, and calm can be felt.

There are several health benefits from mindfulness practices (Brown et al., 2007, Gale, 2008; Gehart, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005, 2014; Kornfield, 2009; Linder, Walsdorf, & Carlson, 2019; McCollum, 2014; Siegel, 2007, 2010) such as promoting a more flexible central nervous system by acting directly on the brain's neural structures themselves, and harnessing its plastic nature to promote healthy adaptation. In turn, this literally generates more grey matter, the material our brains of made of, spawning neurogenesis, and most importantly strengthening the prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain responsible for effective decision-making, rational planning, and impulse control (Brown et al., 2007; Siegel, 2007). Mindfulness practice has also been strongly associated with reduced reactivity in the amygdala, the brain's fear center (Siegel, 2007), which decreases penchants toward anxiety, as well as inappropriate, pernicious, and violent expression of anger and other emotions that can cause problematic behaviors (Atkinson, 2013). These structural and physical changes resulting from mindfulness can render us less impacted by troubling events, more attuned to our loved ones, and enable us to respond more effectively and less reactively in general (Atkinson, 2013, Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007). These qualities also have been strongly associated with resilience in the literature (Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Linder, 2019), even though their connection to mindfulness is only beginning to be thoroughly examined (Halliday, 2018).

Bridging Mindfulness and Resilience: The Mindfulness in Resilience

After extensively searching Google Scholar, Galileo, and Ebsco, among other systematic searches through academic journal databases in the libraries of National University, the authors located approximately 35 studies that specifically explore the relationship between mindfulness

and resilience (Ameli, Sinaii, Luna, Cheringal, & Berger, 2018; Bernstein, Tanay, & Vujanovic, 2011; Benada & Chowdry, 2017; Birchinall, Spendlove, & Buck, 2019; Coholic, 2011; Chen, Xiaoxia, & Chien-Chung, 2021; Chin et al., 2019; Christopher et al., 2018; Coholic, Eys, & Lougheed, 2012; Collins, 2009; Collins, Stritzke, Page, Brown, & Wylde, 2018; Halliday, 2018; Crowder & Sears, 2016; Huang, Chen, Cheung, Greenw, & Lu, 2019; Huang, Chen, Greene, Cheung, & Wei, 2019; Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Hwang et al., 2017; Jha, Morrison, Parker, & Stanley, 2016; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Kemper, Mo, & Khayhat, 2015; Klockner, 2017; McArthur et al., 2017; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Lebares et al., 2018; Lu, Potts, & Allen, 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Pidgeon, Ford, & Klaassen, 2014; Pidgeon & Pickett, 2017; Pereira, Barkhan, Kellet, & Saxon, 2017; Pidgeon & Keye, 2014; Schussler et al., 2018; Sunbul & Guneri, 2019; Thompson, Arnkoff, & Glass, 2011; Zhou, Lui, Niu, Sun, & Fan, 2017; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Many of these focus on mindfulness as being one of various factors that can enhance resilience, but this research is limited in its scope and often unilateral; it usually only focuses on how mindfulness affects resilience but not vice versa. We also conducted a systematic search of the words "mindful" or "mindfulness" in Becvar's (2013) handbook on family resilience and Ungar's handbook on the social ecology of resilience (2012). The word "mindful" appears a total of 22 times in the Becvar handbook, and only twice in Ungar's handbook. When mindfulness is discussed, it is often within the context of spirituality.

Regarding how mindfulness and resilience intersect, Greason and Cashwell (2009) found mindfulness to be a significant predictor of "self-efficacy," which is crucial to resilience. Similarly, Weick and Sutcliffe (2011) conceptualized mindfulness as the backbone of resilience in airplane pilots, for example, who have deterred their planes from likely crashes in the face of severe turbulence or mechanical failure. Lengnick-Hall, Beck, and Lengnick-Hall (2011) also found mindfulness to be instrumental in establishing an organization's adroit management of environmental issues and complexities. Chavers' (2013) study demonstrated a significant relationship between mindfulness and resilience. Bernstein et al. (2011) likewise confirmed that mindful attention and awareness negatively correlates with a posttraumatic stress response, anxiety, and depression. Sunbul & Guneri (2019) found mindfulness to increase self-compassion and emotion regulation, thereby increasing resilience in Turkish adolescents. Chin et al. (2019) found mindfulness interventions to facilitate stress resilience in adults. Chen et al. (2021) showed that reduced mindfulness lowered overall resilience. Lu et al. (2021) found that mindfulness correlated with resilience in a homeless population in south-east United States. Mitchell (2020) found mindful attention to be important in cultivating resilience in a sample of undergraduate students in a nurse training program. While the aforementioned examples do not cover all sources cited above, there is not a great deal of research exploring how mindfulness relates to, influences, or enhances resilience, and even less on the ordinariness of mindfulness.

As Masten (2014) stated, "the fact that it was feasible to assess common domains across diverse contexts suggests some fundamental commonalities in protective factors across diverse contexts." (p. 243). We suggest here that mindfulness is one of the overlooked "fundamental commonalities" Masten referred to. Masten (2014) highlighted that evidence from many studies across cultures points to the following commonly found protective factors: nourishing relationships with attachment figures, problem-solving abilities, and sustaining hope or faith in the face of difficulty. Mindfulness, or simply an attentive nonjudgmental present-focused mind, should be included to the commonly found protective factors, due to its enormous buffering potential and pervasiveness. We now discuss four common threads that show reasonable connections between mindfulness and resilience.

Present-focus

A present-focus is dedicating emotional and mental resources into what is happening in the moment, not the past or future (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005; Brown et al., 2007). Bernstein et al. (2011) and Thomson et al. (2011) demonstrated how important a present-focus is in sustaining resilience over time. It appears to be a prerequisite for other qualities essential to mindfulness and resilience. That is to say, communities, groups, and individuals most likely cannot maintain the other qualities commonly associated with resilience without a present-focus. As one example, Boss (1999) coined the term ambiguous loss, referring to a unique yet pervasive type of loss that may never reach resolve due to not knowing what happened and what is possible in the future (Boss, 2006, 2013). In ambiguous loss, those with a natural inclination toward a present-focus were best able to live most effectively day to day despite significant unresolved losses. This suggests that the core of mindfulness, a present-focus with acceptance and nonjudgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005; Siegel, 2010), is invaluable and frequently evident in those with a penchant toward resilience. As Waldeck, Tyndall, and Chmiel (2015) highlighted, training people to relate more mindfully to their thoughts directly fosters resilience, mainly because they are focusing on the *present*, instead of past hardship and/or anticipated future struggle.

Flexibility

Another quality closely associated with mindfulness and resilience is flexibility (Masten, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). In large, flexibility refers to responding to unanticipated internal and external events effectively and adaptively, focusing on present demands, instead of what happened and why, or what could happen in each unique situation (Masten, 2014). How to cope well depends on the uniqueness of each situation, community, group and individual. Bonanno and Burton (2013) presented three key components to flexibility: (1) How we read the situation, or context sensitivity; (2) a repertoire of behaviors, and (3) the ability to regroup using corrective feedback. The awareness necessary for effective flexibility is clearly linked to the previous thread, present-focus, as described above. Responding with flexibility to one's inner mental world is not only a hallmark of mindfulness (Siegel, 2010), but also resilience (Masten, 2009, 2014).

Tolerating Uncertainty

As previously mentioned, Boss (2006, 2013) has become well-known in the social sciences for researching ambiguous loss. Similar concepts with different labels have been present in Buddhism, one of the initial sites and origins of mindfulness. For instance, prominent Buddhist monk and author Ajan Brahm often states in his widely distributed texts and dharma-talks at monasteries that the "only certainty of the future is uncertainty." With this in mind, mindfulness becomes an exercise of befriending the uncertainty as way of being more fully "here." Subsequently, a key objective in practicing mindfulness is to bring the mind back to whatever is happening in the present moment (the present-focus thread articulated above) to embrace the uncertainty innate to life, which leads us to our next thread. It may just be that mindfulness is what Boss meant by coping successfully with the uncertainty of ambiguous loss, supporting or notion of the ordinary magic of mindfulness.

Self-knowledge and Self-control

Resilience is correlated with self-knowledge and self-control (Becvar, 2013; Masten, 2014). Self-knowledge refers to turning your attention inward and being on familiar terms with your inherent uniqueness, whereas self-control is essentially using self-knowledge wisely to promote effective and intentional behavior in constantly changing circumstances. We propose that mindfulness may be a primary vehicle instead of merely one of many, that facilitates the self-knowledge and self-control necessary to cultivate resilience or thriving in difficult circumstances.

Contact with (manageable) adversity, indispensable to current notions of resilience, may be necessary to cultivate self-knowledge, self-efficacy, and related skills associated with resilience (Masten, 2014). A certain amount of adversity not only fuels the need for self-efficacy, crucial to mindfulness and resilience, but may be essential to developing many of the adaptive capacities, such as self-knowledge, closely associated with resilience. In terms of self-knowledge and self-control, clearly there is a close overlap between mindfulness and resilience, also supporting our notion of the ubiquity of mindfulness.

Mindfulness appears to be closely linked to self-control and emotion regulation, as self-management of attention, arousal, emotions and actions, key aspects of mindfulness, are vital to effective adaptation and resilience (Masten, 2014). Moreover, mindfulness may also be a key part of what Masten refers to as "good intellectual functioning," common to resilience and mindfulness. Furthermore, Baer (2009) characterized mindfulness more broadly as self-focused attention (involving the previously mentioned threads self-knowledge and present-focus) along with Leary and Tate (2007) who explored the multi-faceted nature of mindfulness and its relation to certain adaptive behaviors, not so separable from other individual skillsets or protective factors. Likewise, Brown and Ryan (2003) along with Masicampo and Baumeister (2007) also referred to mindfulness as a self-regulatory capacity (involving self-knowledge and self-control as well), while Linehan (1994) referred to it as an acceptance skill (related to the previously mentioned thread, tolerating uncertainty). All these skills are highly associated with resilience (Masten, 2015), whether or not the term mindfulness has been considered as a common ingredient, further supporting the notion of the ordinariness of mindfulness.

Mindfulness and Resilience: Challenges, Construct Difficulty, and Shared Vagaries

Resilience as it is conceptualized in the West, reflects ethnocentrism and the supremacy of the white middle class (Ungar, 2008, 2016). Also, there still remains a great deal of definitional variation regarding what resilience means (Ungar, 2004). The resilience literature also points to measurement and sampling issues, which are similar to a great deal of mindfulness research (Brown, Ryan, Loverick, Beigel, & West, 2011; Davidson & Dahl, 2018; Grossman, 2008; Van Dam et al., 2018).

Ungar (2004) proposed that resilience can refer to "internalized capacities" (p. 346), or certain behaviors in response to a stressor, depending on many contextual factors, highlighting the ambiguity in resilience as a construct. Similarly, several issues prevail in mindfulness research. Participants in studies may differ in their semantic, conceptual or experimental understanding of what items on a given scale mean (Brown et al., 2011; Grossman, 2008; Van dam et al., 2018). Most studies to date also have only one treatment group, no placebo, and rarely examine physiological data (Grossman, 2008, 2014). Accordingly, investigators are unable to ascertain whether positive effects found in many studies are due to the mindfulness practices themselves, or

the general act of intentionally taking time to participate in activities believed to improve wellbeing.

Also, similar to resilience, there has also been confusion as to what exactly the construct "mindfulness" refers to. It has been referred to as a technique, a more general method or collection of techniques, a psychological process that can produce physical changes, and also as an outcome in and of itself. Clearly, mindfulness has been defined differently across the empirical literature. Also, many of the originators of empirical assessment scales have varying levels of personal experience or training in mindfulness (Grossman, 2008), which influences interpretation, and not all scales meant to measure mindfulness are inter-correlated.

While all these complications in the literature may subtract from the propositions presented in this manuscript, fortunately, researchers are in the process to come to a consensus on operational definitions on resilience and mindfulness. Even so, with mindfulness, this runs the risk of altering its original definition rooted in Buddhism centuries ago (Kirmayer, 2015). Another point to consider is that even though mindfulness is ultimately a secular way of being or practice, it can get easily confused with religious affiliation (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010), which may alter perception of the practices and related tendencies. Mindfulness is not only understood by examining the literature and intellectual thinking or theorizing, but has fundamental experiential, practical, and introspective qualities which are difficult to objectively measure (Grossman, 2008, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Van Dam et at., 2018), and may be very present in communities, families, groups, and individuals who have never heard of mindfulness, adding credibility to the ideas proposed in this manuscript.

Lastly, just like the resilience literature may exaggerate psychopathology in underrepresented groups due to lack of cultural awareness or sensitivity (Boss, 2006; Ungar, 2004, 2008, 2016; Walsh, 2015), both the mindfulness and the resilience literatures have focused most on the experiences of white, able-bodied, educated, cisgendered, and heterosexual middle-class adults. In sum, measurement (Grossman, 2008, 2014: Brown et al., 2011) and sampling issues (Dehaan et al., 2013; Ungar, 2004, 2016) plague both bodies of literature. This is also a relevant factor regarding the purpose of this paper, as it implies that many communities, families, and people can behave mindfully and benefit from its protective tendencies without ever having intended to formally practice mindfulness.

While mindfulness research has exponentially expanded during the last three decades, there are still important limitations. McCollum (2014) has cautioned scholars and practitioners that countless recent studies on mindfulness have only focused on its beneficial effects, possibly idealizing it, overlooking potential negative experiences.

Conclusions: Intersections of Mindfulness and Resilience

Earlier in this paper we briefly presented essential elements of two resilience frameworks, one by Walsh (2013), and the other by Masten (2014). We now return to discussing the intersections between each of these frameworks, and mindfulness. We proposed that mindfulness is more common and widespread than believed, and that it is not only cultivated through rigorous training, what mindfulness scholars refer to as formal mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005, 2014; Linder et al., 2019; Pollak, Pedulla, & Siegel; 2013; Siegel, 2009). We also suggest that mindfulness deserves more presence in the resilience literature and research, as a mechanism for explaining the development of resilient behaviors. Similar to resilience, present-moment

awareness, a key aspect of mindfulness, is a lot more ubiquitous and "everyday" than currently accounted for; it just had not been referred to as mindfulness in a lot of the scholarship to date.

An ultimate goal of resilience research is to uncover and effectively utilize untapped assets (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Walsh, 2015). Mindfulness may be another natural ability waiting to emerge, inherent and "ordinary" in most communities, families, groups, and individuals. Moreover, similar to resilience (Masten, 2014), we propose that mindfulness transpires from "ordinary" resources and processes present in most communities, groups, and individuals. Similarly, just like resilience research peaks in difficult sociopolitical times (Masten, 2014), mindfulness tends to garner more scholarly attention and is imperative to practice in difficult times as well (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Linder et al., 2019; Siegel, 2009), such as the COVID-2019 pandemic. In this sense we suggest that mindfulness does not require anything special or unusual, just the "ordinary magic" of the natural proclivities already common in many minds and bodies, relationships, and communities.

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