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# Mindfulness, Stress and Self: An Ontological Shift

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Community Health,  
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## Abstract

In this study a six week mindfulness programme is delivered to twenty nine health care professionals. Research questions address: what participants' discourse can tell us about their experiences of stress over the course of the programme, what the changes in discourse suggest that is theoretically useful to the study of mindfulness, and what an exploration of ontological underpinnings can provide to develop our understanding? And finally, whether this exploration supports a useful theory on both mindfulness and stress?

Daily diary, interview and email data is gathered on participants' discourses on stress and mindfulness. A Social Constructionist epistemology and Grounded Theory methods are used to analyse the data. Most research and commentary on mindfulness is positivist and quantitative relating to health outcomes and psychological processes. This leaves a gap in the literature that this qualitative study addresses.

A main theme in participants' discourse on stress relates to feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Participants talk of the causes of and solutions to stress and of themselves and others as 'bad and wrong'. This discourse reflects a 'rational self' view through the use of mechanistic, rationalistic and individualistic terms to convey experience. This 'rational self' view is grounded in a Cartesian ontology or worldview. In the discourse on stress, participants' appear to view themselves ideally as rational, autonomous, non-emotional and in control.

A core social process is that with mindfulness training participants' discourse on stress changes from a disempowered to an empowered view of self. In mindfulness training participants are asked to adopt an alternative to the Cartesian conceptualisation of self. They are asked to practice *I am not my thoughts* and *acceptance of all aspects of experience in the present moment*. After mindfulness training, participants' discourse is of more calmness, peace, insight, awareness, creativity and a sense of expanded time and space. These discourses reflect an empowered view of self and a sense of agency. The discourses are

compared to those before mindfulness training, and to those of the non-finishers and the stress literatures.

An alternative ontological view of the nature of 'being' or 'reality' and its resultant discourse has implications for stress research and mindfulness research and practice. The conceptualisation of 'being' evident in the Buddhist origins of mindfulness (concepts of 'no self' and experience as essentially 'empty') is not generally explored in the mainstream literature.

Literatures on stress, mindfulness and self provide a framework from which to explore participants' discourses. It appears that mindfulness programmes in the West have been uplifted and separated from their Eastern origins and rearticulated within a Cartesian ontology. It is important to address questions on mindfulness and stress ontologically to provide a broader range of options for future study, treatment approaches and practice.

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deal personally to this work and it was not possible without their enthusiasm and honesty.  
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“Two years ago an old man was stopped on a road near Lhasa with a golden statue. He had sold everything he owned to buy the statue, so he could leave it at a holy mountain to gain merit for the soul of his dead wife. He was certain she had died because he had cut down the prayer flags that always flew over their house to use the rope to tether their last two sheep. He was arrested because he told someone he had killed his wife. Someone else reported that he had given a man money for the death of his wife. It was the money given to the goldsmith but no one bothered to explain. He was accused of having stolen the statue and did not deny it because the house he had sold to buy it had belonged to his wife.”

“What happened?”

“He was sent to prison and died in three months...The government had all its facts right. He did say he killed his wife. He did pay money because of the death. He did feel like a thief with the statue...People here live by truths, not by facts.”

(Eliot Pattison, *Beautiful Ghosts*, 2004, p.117)

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