



Articles

Minding Your Matters: Predicting Satisfaction, Commitment, and Conflict Strategies From Trait Mindfulness

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Abstract

This exploratory study sought to uncover whether trait mindfulness, an individual's aptitude for focusing on the present moment while refraining from passing negative judgments or processing external cues in a habitual manner, is predictive of more constructive and less destructive approaches to relational conflict. In addition, we looked at its predictive role in relational satisfaction and commitment. Ninety-one participants completed self-report measures on trait mindfulness, relational satisfaction, commitment, and conflict strategies. Results revealed that aspects of mindfulness predict the type of conflict strategy in which people reportedly engage. Mindfulness subscales were also related positively to satisfaction and commitment. In concluding, we discuss limitations and potential avenues for future inquiry in this area.

Keywords: mindfulness, conflict, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships

Interpersona, 2015, Vol. 9(1), 44–58, doi:10.5964/ijpr.v9i1.168

Received: 2014-06-25. Accepted: 2015-05-07. Published (VoR): 2015-06-30.

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Relational partners vary in the ways they tend to enact conflict, and researchers have concluded that the conflict strategies people utilize can be helpful or deleterious to personal and relational outcomes (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Gottman, 1994). As such, scholarly work has centered on understanding how relational partners engage in conflict and what conflict strategies induce positive or negative outcomes when enacted. Our contribution to this area includes an effort to understand whether there are additional dispositions that are associated with more positive and less negative forms of conflict engagement. In particular, we examine whether the tendency to be *mindful* is positively predictive of constructive (and negatively predictive of destructive) strategies when engaging in conflict with a romantic partner. Mindfulness (as described below) is associated with a number of positive social outcomes such as increased relationship satisfaction and closeness, and decreased utilization of habitual response patterns (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Wenk-Sormaz, 2005). In many instances these social outcomes can directly or tangentially relate to the ways in which conflict is enacted. As such, we sought to test whether mindfulness might also directly relate to the ways in which conflict tends to be engaged. Given that mindfulness can be learned (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), exploring its predictive role on choice of conflict behavior has the potential to affect relational health as well as to broaden our understanding of conflict engagement.

Mindfulness consists of the capacity to focus on *present-moment* experience while remaining *nonjudgmental* toward both the self and others regardless of circumstance or context (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). People typically have short attention spans, and when going about daily activities they will often multi-task in deed and/or thought (Wenk-Sormaz, 2005). Much of the “present-moment” that a person experiences may be clouded with thoughts or concerns over future/past occurrences such as to-do lists or regrets rather than centering one’s attention on *current* internal or external stimuli. Similarly, we are creatures of habit: We tend to judge and evaluate our experiences based on learned interpretations (i.e., what has happened in the past) (Wenk-Sormaz, 2005). Being mindful however, involves consciously focusing one’s attention or action on only one aspect of the present-moment and doing so in a nonjudgmental way, both of which can alter the ways in which we engage with close others.

Mindfulness has only recently been suggested as important to interpersonal and relational communication (see e.g. Barnes et al., 2007; Jones & Hansen, 2014; Pepping, Davis, & O’Donovan, 2013; Snyder, Shapiro, & Treleaven, 2012). Our aim was to understand whether *trait*-mindfulness, or one’s general propensity to be mindful, is associated with conflict strategies used among romantic partners. We begin by discussing relational conflict and mindfulness before we present the results of our study.

Relational Conflict

Relational conflict is defined as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (Barki & Hartwick, 2004, p. 234). This definition assumes that relational partners are likely to disagree with each other, causing negative emotions to arise in one or both partners. These disagreements should eventually be addressed in talk so that negative emotions can be resolved and that both partners can learn and grow from one another (Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000).

Most conflict centers on topics such as finances, household chores, jealousy, communicative processes, or the amount of affection a partner exhibits (or does not exhibit) (Cupach, 2000). When relational partners experience dissonance in these or other areas, they will often attempt to challenge the perceptions or actions of one another in an effort to promote changes in behavior or perspective (Johnson & Roloff, 2000; Stutman & Newell, 1990). Such confrontations have been studied widely, and researchers have identified particular conflict strategies individuals tend to enact during conflict episodes (e.g., Gottman, 1995; Sillars, 1980; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). These conflict strategies are categorized as constructive or destructive depending on whether they have associations with positive or negative individual/relational outcomes. Zacchilli and colleagues (2009) describe six common strategies used by relational partners: *Compromise* (each partner gives up some of what s/he wants to settle on an agreeable solution), *Interactional Reactivity* (acting aggressively toward a partner), *Domination* (attempting to control a partner), *Separation* (departing the conflict interaction after making arrangements or plans to discuss the issue at a later time), *Avoidance* (actively circumventing conflict), and *Submission* (conceding to a partner). Strategies that include a high concern for both members of the relationship are typically thought to be more beneficial than strategies which serve to meet one partner’s needs at the expense or detriment of the other (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Of the aforementioned styles, compromise is typically considered a positive strategy as it meets aspects of each partners’ desires or needs. Interactional reactivity and domination are typically used when one is focused on meeting his/her own needs rather than the needs of a partner, and thus tend to be associated with negative relational outcomes. Submission occurs when someone has a low concern for his or her own needs and a high concern for the other person’s. Although submission can serve to satisfy the other partner, this style is ultimately not associated with a high level of satisfaction for the individual enacting it. Avoidance occurs

when one eschews a conflict situation and, according to [Zacchilli et al. \(2009\)](#), is considered a more neutral form of conflict. Last, separation is thought of as a non-valenced form of conflict as well, and research has not determined conclusively whether it is associated with positive or negative outcomes ([Zacchilli et al., 2009](#)). Although researchers have identified constructive and destructive approaches to conflict engagement, there is more to learn what underlies the choice of constructive, rather than destructive, strategies, particularly in light of the emotional environment of many conflict episodes. We propose that *mindfulness* might be an important predictive variable in couples' conflict.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is defined as awareness of and non-judgmental acceptance toward present moment experiences ([Brown & Ryan, 2003](#)). [Brown, Ryan, and Creswell \(2007\)](#) describe mindfulness as having “a receptive state of mind, wherein attention is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, and the basic capacities for awareness and attention permit the individual to be present to reality rather than react to it or habitually process it” (p. 212).

Mindfulness seems to have highly positive effects on psychological and physiological well-being (see, e.g., [Atwood & Maltin, 1991](#); [Brown et al., 2007](#); [Dowd & McCleery, 2007](#)). Mindfulness has also been incorporated into a number of health rehabilitation programs because of its observed benefits. Such benefits include reductions in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depressive symptoms, alcohol consumption, anxiety, adverse medical conditions, and chronic distress or pain ([Evans, Ferrando, Carr, & Haglin, 2011](#); [Kerr, Josyula, & Littenberg, 2011](#); [Smith et al., 2011](#)).

Mindfulness seems to have such positive benefits because personal biases or reflections on past encounters are diffused ([Brown & Ryan, 2003](#); [Teasdale, 1999](#)). The mindful person is able to focus on the present moment, making note of any negative thought patterns she is having, while attempting to refrain from unconstructive interpretations of present-moment experience. In other words, the mindful person is able to detach from negative emotions and to view these emotions as impermanent. Conversely, when unmindful, individuals tend to evaluate events based on learned interpretations that have become habitual and are often problematic ([Wenk-Sormaz, 2005](#)).

Mindfulness is not a uni-dimensional construct; it consists of several behavioral tendencies which include *observing* (attending to internal and external stimuli, such as emotions, sights, or sounds), *describing* (having the ability to label, define, and express thoughts toward present-moment experiences), *acting with awareness* (focusing attention on only *one thing* in the present-moment, whether this is a feeling, a sight, a sound, or any other internal or external cue), and *withholding judgment* (abstaining from *evaluating* the present moment, particularly in a negative fashion).

There are both trait- and state- levels of mindfulness. Trait-mindfulness consists of one's general propensity to act mindfully in every-day life. State-mindfulness suggests that there are particular settings in which individuals may be more or less mindful depending on circumstances. Importantly, scholars argue that both state and trait-mindfulness can be improved upon through greater knowledge and use of mindfulness strategies ([Shapiro, Brown, Thoresen, & Plante, 2011](#)). In the current study, we focus on individuals' existing levels of trait-mindfulness to understand whether their inclination to act mindfully might be differentially associated with the reported enactment of certain conflict strategies. Before discussing in to the current study, we integrate literature on mindfulness, romantic relationships, and conflict to provide a backdrop for our hypotheses and research questions.

Mindfulness, Romantic Relationships, and Conflict

Relational satisfaction and commitment are strongly tied to the conflict strategies romantic partners use (see, e.g., Cramer, 2004; Holmes & Murray, 1996; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Similarly, trait mindfulness has been tied to relational satisfaction, respect, love/commitment, and lower levels of negative responses *after* conflict (Barnes et al., 2007). Barnes and colleagues assert these associations may be due to the positive relationship between mindfulness and one's perceptions of the partner as well as lower emotional stress responses or lower levels of perceived relationship stress. To replicate the relationship between mindfulness, relational satisfaction, and commitment, we predicted that (*H1*) higher levels of mindfulness predict higher relational satisfaction and commitment.

Researchers have not yet studied associations among trait-mindfulness, relational satisfaction, commitment, and romantic partners' reported use of conflict strategies during disagreement; however, practicing mindfulness can lower individuals' stress responses to relational conflict after it has occurred (Barnes et al., 2007). In addition, mindfulness practice promotes closeness, connection, and harmony in romantic relationships (Kabat-Zinn, 1993; Welwood, 1996) and alleviates relationship-specific stress. It seems to also elevate relational happiness in general (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004) and may be associated with more skillful and prosocial forms of communicating (see Jones & Hansen, 2014; Jones, *in press*). To explore whether this could extend to conflict interactions, we asked the following exploratory research questions: (*RQ1*) Do higher levels of mindfulness negatively predict the use of negative conflict strategies such as domination and reactivity? (*RQ2*) Do higher levels of mindfulness predict greater use of positive conflict strategies such as compromise?

Although mindfulness predicts a host of important social outcomes, certain associations have emerged after examining the presence of mediating variables. For example, Schutte and Malouff (2011) found that the relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being is mediated by emotional intelligence. Likewise, Thomas (2012) suggests that personal distress mediates the relationship between mindfulness and professional well-being. We wanted to test whether relational variables such as satisfaction and commitment might mediate the relationship between mindfulness and conflict strategies: (*RQ3*) If aspects of mindfulness negatively predict the use of destructive conflict strategies such as domination or reactivity, does relational satisfaction or commitment mediate the relationship between mindfulness and negative conflict strategies? (*RQ4*) If aspects of mindfulness predict the use of positive conflict strategies such as compromise, does relational satisfaction or commitment mediate the relationship between mindfulness and positive conflict strategies?

Finally, because "[s]ome of the characteristics of mindfulness are self-regulation of attention, non-judgmental awareness, adoption of an orientation of curiosity, openness, acceptance of one's experience in the present moment and cultivating familiarity with the workings of one's mind" (Evans et al., 2011, p. 553), our last question centered on whether individuals with higher levels of mindfulness would report using such openness, curiosity, and withholding of judgment in their efforts to solve conflict. Individuals with higher trait-mindfulness might approach conflict from a more neutral or even positive perspective, perhaps making them less likely to avoid dealing with conflict; on the other hand, individuals with high levels of trait mindfulness might have the ability to recognize when separation or avoidance during conflict could prove beneficial. Existing research provides little clarity here. As such, our last research question was entirely exploratory: (*RQ5*) Do higher levels of mindfulness positively or negatively predict the use of avoidance or separation strategies during conflict?

Method

Procedures

After securing IRB approval, data were gathered using an anonymous online questionnaire. Participants were solicited via snowball sampling using online social networking sites (SNS). Study announcements were posted on a number of social networking pages and then “shared” by other SNS users so as to increase dissemination of the study to unique networks of individuals. In order to participate in the study, individuals had to be 18 years old or older and in a committed romantic relationship for at least the past year. Once at the questionnaire webpage, participants were asked to complete the survey. Last, participants were asked to provide demographic information on their sex, partner sex, marital status, cohabitation, and age.

Participants

Participants consisted of 70.8% males and 27% females (2.2% unanswered), with 41% in same-sex relationships and 59% in opposite-sex relationships. Approximately 57% of participants reported being married, and 78% noted that they lived with their partner. Reported length of relationship averaged 119 months (9.9 years), $SD = 117$ months (9.75 years). Participants’ ages ranged from 22 to 66 with an average of 38.1 years ($SD = 12.9$). Sample ethnicity was predominantly Caucasian (approximately 89%) with 1.1% Pacific-Islander, 1.1% African-American, 1.1% Chicano, 3.3% of mixed ethnicity, and 4.5% unspecified.

Measures

Mindfulness — Participants completed the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (KIMS; Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004). This instrument is designed to measure the four mindfulness elements mentioned above: *describing*, *observing*, *acting with awareness*, and *accepting without judgment* (Baer et al., 2004). It is comprised of 39 items that individuals rate on a 1 (never or rarely true) to 5 (always or almost always true) scale. Examples of item statements include “I notice changes in my body, such as whether my breathing slows down or speeds up,” and “When I’m doing something, I’m only focused on what I’m doing, nothing else.” The KIMS “measures a general tendency to be mindful in daily life and does not require experiences with meditation [a primary tool in learning mindfulness]” (Baer et al., 2006, p. 29). The KIMS is considered reliable, as reported by Baer and colleagues, with *alpha* coefficients ranging from .83 to .91 for each of the four mindfulness subscales. Reliabilities specific to our study were .83 for *observing*, .87 for *describe*, .70 for *acting with awareness* (note: achieved after removing three items to improve reliability), and .84 for *accepting without judgment*.

Satisfaction and commitment — Participants completed a modified version of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) to assess their *relational satisfaction* and *commitment* on a 1 (do not agree at all) to 8 (agree completely) scale. Sample questions include, “My partner fulfills my needs for intimacy” and “I feel satisfied with our relationship.” The Investment Scale demonstrates good reliability, with *alpha* coefficients ranging typically from .91 to .95 for commitment and .92 to .95 for satisfaction (Rusbult et al., 1998). In the current study, *alphas* were .83 and .91 respectively.

Conflict strategies — Participants completed the romantic partner conflict scale (RPCS) (Zacchilli et al., 2009). We chose this scale because it focuses specifically on how conflict is resolved *between relational partners*, it aims to measure normative conflict interactions rather than abusive conflict, and targets concrete interaction strategies partners use during conflict (Zacchilli et al., 2009). The scale measures six strategies discussed above: *Compromise*, *Domination*, *Avoidance*, *Separation*, *Submission*, and *Interactional Reactivity* (a partner responding with aggress-

iveness and/or volatility toward the other) using a 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree) scale. Sample questions include, “When my partner and I disagree, we argue loudly” and “I surrender to my partner when we disagree on an issue.” Analysis of *alpha* coefficients by [Zacchilli et al. \(2009\)](#) demonstrated good reliability as each subscale ranged from .82 to .95. *Alpha* coefficients for our study consisted of .82 for *avoidance*, .91 for *compromise*, .81 for *react*, .88 for *submission*, .88 for *separation*, and .90 for *domination*.

Results

We first computed achieved power using G*power version 3.1.7. With $n = 91$, $p < .05$, power to detect moderate effects was estimated at .83 and power to detect large effects was .99. Before analyzing our research questions we examined descriptive statistics and Pearson-product correlations to ensure there were no instances of multicollinearity and to examine relationships among the mindfulness subscales, conflict subscales, relational satisfaction, and commitment. Results illustrate a number of significantly related variables. Specific to mindfulness and conflict, the mindful aspect of describing was positively related to compromise and negatively related to avoidance. Acting with awareness was negatively related to dominance. Mindful nonjudgment was negatively related to interactional reactivity and dominance. In addition, mindful ability to describe positively correlated with relational satisfaction, and nonjudgment positively correlated with commitment. For means, standard deviations, and all other correlations see [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between Mindfulness, Relational Satisfaction, Commitment, and Conflict

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Mean	SD
1. Satisfaction	-	.57**	.10	.26*	-.13	.09	.58**	-.01	-.04	-.01	-.66**	-.34**	4.46	0.99
2. Commitment			-.03	.18	.00	.21*	.28**	-.00	-.13	.07	-.40**	-.19	7.24	1.10
3. Observe				.30*	.02	-.16	-.04	-.04	.05	-.15	.06	-.04	3.28	0.66
4. Describe					.12	-.00	.22*	-.20	-.07	-.21*	-.06	-.13	3.91	0.72
5. Awareness						.28**	-.18	-.06	-.06	-.01	.20	-.21*	3.00	0.60
6. Nonjudgment							.03	.00	-.15	.10	-.21*	-.41**	3.39	0.72
7. Compromise								-.15	.12	-.16	-.50**	-.14	3.01	0.75
8. Submission									.13	.47**	.14	.11	1.37	1.05
9. Separation										.11	.03	.26*	1.98	1.07
10. Avoidance											-.01	.16	1.89	1.16
11. Reactivity												.43**	0.76	0.84
12. Dominance													1.34	1.02

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

We then examined our research questions. We chose to utilize hierarchical regression analyses which allowed us to control for potential demographic influences on results. Specifically, we controlled for participant sex, cohabitation, marital status, and age since the aforementioned variables are known to have relationships with model predictors (see [Burpee & Langer, 2005](#); [Mogilner, Kamvar, & Aaker, 2011](#)). In addition, we tested the research questions using mindfulness subscales, rather than combining the subscales to form a generalized mindfulness construct. We did so because [Baum and colleagues \(2010\)](#) assert that the KIMS does not measure an overarching construct of mindfulness, rather the subscales are indicative of different *components* of mindfulness. An added benefit of doing this was that is allowed us to examine how aspects of mindfulness uniquely predict conflict

strategies after controlling for the variance in other subscales, an important step in an exploratory study such as this.

To test whether trait mindfulness would positively predict romantic partners' relational satisfaction and commitment levels two separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed. For the first model predicting satisfaction, all demographics were entered into block one. Demographics accounted for 7% of the variance in satisfaction, a non-significant result, $F(5, 82) = 1.22, p > .05$. The four mindfulness subscales were entered into block two. After controlling for demographics, mindfulness accounted for 21% of the variance in satisfaction, $\Delta F(9, 78) = 3.12, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .13$. An inspection of significant beta coefficients revealed unique findings. The ability to *describe* was significantly predictive of relational satisfaction ($b = .401, p < .01$). The other mindfulness subscales were not significantly predictive of relational satisfaction.

Our second model assessed mindfulness and commitment, again with demographics entered into block one, and the mindfulness subscales entered into block two. The first block was significant, $F(5, 82) = 3.50, p < .01$, and predicted 17% of the variance in commitment. After examining beta coefficients for this block however, cohabitation emerged as the only significant predictor of commitment ($b = .97, p < .01$). Block two was also significant, $\Delta F(9, 78) = 3.00, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .08$. Individual beta coefficients revealed that mindful ability to *describe* was the only significant predictor of commitment ($b = .33, p < .05$). These results offer partial support for hypothesis one.

Our first research question was designed to understand whether higher levels of mindfulness predict less frequent use of negative conflict strategies (domination and reactivity). Similarly, our second research question sought to determine whether higher levels of mindfulness would predict greater use of positive conflict strategies (i.e., compromise). To test both questions, hierarchical regression analyses were performed with demographics entered in block one of each model, the mindfulness subscales entered into block two, and one conflict style entered as the criterion variable for each model. Block one of the first model examining domination during conflict, was not significant $F(5, 82) = 1.85, p > .05$, with demographics accounting for 10% of the variance in conflict domination. Block two however, was significant, $\Delta F(9, 78) = 2.23, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .11$, illustrating that aspects of trait-mindfulness predict lower use of domination during conflict. Specifically, mindful *withholding of judgment* emerged as a negative predictor of domination, ($b = -.489, p < .01$). No other mindfulness subscales were significant negative, or positive, predictors of this conflict strategy.

Block one of the second model, examining reactivity during conflict, was significant, $F(5, 78) = 2.33, p = .05$, with coefficients indicating that age negatively predicted reactivity during conflict, ($b = -.02, p < .05$). No other demographic variables significantly predicted reactivity. Block two was also significant, $\Delta F(9, 74) = 2.38, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .10$. Coefficients in this model indicated mindful *withholding of judgment* negatively predicted reactivity during conflict ($b = -.27, p < .05$). The other two mindfulness scales were not uniquely predictive of reactivity during conflict.

Lastly, block one of the third model examining the use of compromise during conflict was not significant, $F(5, 82) = 1.22, p > .05$, with demographics accounting for only 7% of the variance in compromise during conflict. The second block was significant, $\Delta F(9, 78) = 3.61, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .15$, with coefficients revealing that mindful *ability to describe* was uniquely predictive of compromise ($b = .36, p < .01$). No other mindfulness subscales positively or negatively predicted compromise during conflict.

Our third and fourth research questions were dependent on the results from RQ1 and RQ2. As portions of mindfulness predicted increased use of positive conflict strategies and decreased use of negative strategies, we sought to understand whether relational satisfaction might mediate these relationships. To ascertain whether a mediator is significant, the correlation between a predictor and outcome variable should diminish significantly (partial mediation) or entirely (full mediation) when the relationships between the predictor/mediator variables and mediator/outcome variables is accounted for. Indirect effects were obtained using Preacher & Hayes Indirect macro for SPSS. This is a nonparametric procedure that is suitable for small sample sizes (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Preacher and Hayes (2008) assert that in order for the mediation test to be significant, upper and lower bound CIs should not include the zero point. Results confirmed that relational satisfaction played a partial mediating role between mindful *ability to describe* and the use of compromise as a conflict strategy ($b = .16$; CI = .05 to .33). Relational satisfaction did not play a full or partial mediating role in any other tests. Similarly, commitment did not emerge as a full or partial mediating variable in any of the mediation tests.

Our last research question examined the relationship between mindfulness and individuals' propensity to avoid conflict through the use of either avoidance or separation strategies. Here, we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses with demographics entered into block one, the four mindfulness subscales entered into block two, and conflict separation and conflict avoidance as the two criterion variables. Neither block one, $F(5, 82) = .47, p > .05$, nor block two, $F(9, 78) = .49, p > .05$, for the model examining mindfulness and separation was significant. Likewise, neither block one, $F(5, 82) = .45, p > .05$, nor block two, $F(9, 77) = 1.01, p > .05$, for the model examining mindfulness and avoidance was significant. In looking at individual beta coefficients for both models, only mindful *ability to describe* trended toward negatively predicting avoidance during conflict ($b = -.37, p = .057$). No other variables significantly predicted use or nonuse of these conflict strategies.

Overall, these results indicate that certain aspects of mindfulness are positively associated with positive conflict strategies and negatively associated with negative conflict strategies, as reported by our participants. Nonetheless, other aspects of trait mindfulness had no relationship with the conflict strategies reported. Such findings suggest a mixed but intriguing relationship between mindfulness and conflict. Detailed below is a discussion of why this may have occurred, the implications these findings may have for couples' conflict experiences and relational well-being, and suggestions for the next steps in investigating mindfulness, relational quality, and conflict.

Discussion

Researchers suggest that mindfulness likely plays an important role in romantic relationships (Boorstein, 1996; Kabat-Zinn, 1993; Welwood, 1996). Results of the current study add to this literature by illuminating how levels of trait mindfulness may be tied to partner propensities to use certain kinds of conflict strategies. Although a considerable amount of research on mindfulness has been conducted by relationship researchers interested in psychological or other health-related variables (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1993, 1994), research regarding its tie to communication has remained scant (for an exception see Huston, Garland, & Farb, 2011; Jones & Hansen, 2014). This study was conducted to build our knowledge in this area.

We hypothesized that mindfulness would positively predict relational partners' satisfaction and commitment levels and found some support for this contention. Specifically, self-reported mindful *ability to describe* predicted both relational satisfaction and commitment (although the overall model for commitment was not statistically significant).

Mindful ability to *describe* is related to one's aptitude for defining and labeling present moment experiences. Subsequently, when a person feels able to describe thoughts and feelings toward a topic of conflict with his or her partner easily, s/he likely is said to have a high aptitude for the mindful ability to describe, thus predicting an increase in that person's satisfaction and/or commitment levels. These results echo similar findings in emotional expression literature suggesting that individuals in romantic relationships who are more emotionally expressive feel greater relational satisfaction (King, 1993). They also echo results found by Huston et al. (2011) who found that individuals practicing mindfulness techniques tend to *positively reappraise* stressful events more often than those not practicing mindfulness. Although speculative, the ability to reappraise events as meaningful or even beneficial during what can be an emotional interaction, and then describing this reappraisal to others, could be help explain our findings (see also Jones & Hansen, 2014).

The unique aspect of the mindful ability to describe scale used in this study, however, is geared toward understanding perceptions of how *skilled* one feels when putting thoughts/feelings into words. Thus, our results suggest that individuals not only feel more satisfaction and commitment in a relationship when they believe they are "allowed" to express their emotions, but the extent to which they feel capable/able to express emotions matters as well. This is in line with findings by Noller, Beach, and Osgarby (1997), who propose that, when relational partners have the ability to describe feelings and emotions accurately to their relational partners, as occurs when individuals practice the ability to *describe* aspect of mindfulness, they are more likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction. These results indicate that specific aspects of mindfulness may play unique roles in cultivating certain relational outcomes such as increased satisfaction and commitment through individuals' orientation to their relationship and themselves, although the causal nature of this contention remains to be studied.

Our first research question sought to examine whether higher levels of mindfulness would predict lower use of negative conflict strategies. Similarly, our second research question examined whether higher levels of mindfulness would predict greater use of positive conflict strategies. Findings from each research question lent some support for the contention that mindfulness is associated with an increase in positive conflict strategies and a decrease in negative conflict strategies. A particular aspect of mindfulness—the ability to *describe*—however, appears to be what predicted the reported likelihood of engaging in positive strategies (i.e., compromise). It is possible that the more capable one feels in describing his/her feelings, the more likely a relational partner is to see his or her perspective; and understanding each other's perspectives is a key component accompanying individuals' willingness to negotiate during a disagreement.

Findings pertaining to mindfulness and its relationship with negative conflict strategies illustrated that the ability to *withhold judgment* predicted a decreased likelihood of engaging in domination and reactivity. Such an outcome makes sense, given that judgment involves evaluating whether something is good/bad, right/wrong, etc. When relational partners are in disagreement with one another, it is likely that most judgments arising in this context would be negative, perhaps providing a prime pathway for reactivity and domination to ensue. Such findings may have interesting implications, considering mindfulness can be cultivated (for a review on *how* to cultivate mindfulness, see Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Although speculative at this point, individuals' cultivation of mindfulness may provide an opportunity for them to manage conflict more effectively, thus increasing positive conflict outcomes.

Our third and fourth research questions were concerned with understanding whether relational satisfaction or commitment played a mediating role in the relationships between mindfulness and the use of positive or negative conflict strategies. Results should be interpreted with caution as our study is cross-sectional in nature, but findings

suggested that relational satisfaction mediates the relationship between mindful *ability to describe* and the use of compromise during conflict. Commitment did not, however, mediate relationships between mindfulness subscales and the reported use of negative conflict strategies.

Previous research findings may help explain why relational satisfaction specifically mediates the relationship between individuals' ability to describe thoughts and feelings, and their purported use of positive conflict strategies. The "ability to describe" is the component of mindfulness that is most closely related to communication competence, as both comprise of the ability to describe thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental and ethical manner (Baer et al., 2004; Canary & Lakey, 2006). Moreover, research suggests that being a competent communicator is associated with higher relational satisfaction (Arroyo & Segrin, 2011), and higher relational satisfaction has previously predicted increased use of positive conflict strategies such as collaborating in order to find a conflict solution (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). As such, our findings appear to confirm, and connect, previous research exploring these relationships: When individuals are able to describe thoughts or feelings accurately, they tend to feel more satisfied in their relationships and are therefore more willing to compromise during relational conflict.

Our last research question examined whether mindfulness would positively or negatively predict individuals' use of avoidance or separation strategies during conflict management. No significant findings emerged in our analyses. The authors of the RPCS state that separation and avoidance strategies are not clearly destructive or constructive (Zacchilli et al., 2009). Depending on *how* separation and avoidance are utilized during conflict might be more predictive of whether they are associated with positive or negative conflict outcomes. As mindful individuals are more likely to pick up on the external cues in their environment, they may also be well-suited to recognize when separation or avoidance would be detrimental or advantageous. This may in part explain why no significant findings emerged for the use of separation or avoidance strategies. Thus, trait mindfulness might have a relationship with *why* and *when* particular conflict styles are utilized, rather than simply the amount with which they are utilized. Further research can help to determine more nuance regarding these relationships.

Although the current study demonstrates interesting connections between mindfulness and reports of conflict behaviors, a number of limitations exist, and additional research is needed. For example, all participants were recruited via snowball sampling using online social networking websites. This type of recruitment procedure, while able to increase the sample's diversity in some important ways (specifically, there were more males and more same sex relationships reported on in this study than in many relationship surveys), also limits the overall generalizability of our results and only paints a one-sided picture of a phenomenon that is inherently dyadic. Researchers may also wish to replicate this study using different measures of mindfulness, as multiple self-report scales currently exist (see Johnson, 2007), and other scales might capture additional facets of mindfulness such as nonreactivity (see Baer et al., 2006) and non-attachment (see Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010). In addition, some unexamined demographic variables could account for some of the found associations (e.g. education level) and should at minimum be controlled for in future work. Likewise, although we examined trait-mindfulness in this study, individuals may have differing levels of experience with meditation and meditation is known to impact both state and trait-mindfulness so individuals may answer mindfulness measures differently based on their knowledge and use of mindfulness practices.

In addition, researchers may want to focus on different types of conflict strategies and their relation to mindfulness as other scholars have underscored conflict tactics that differ from the strategies assessed in this study (e.g., Peterson, 1983; Sillars, 1980). For example, *collaboration* is a conflict strategy that is cooperative in nature and

is high in assertiveness, disclosure, and support, making it a positive and constructive way of managing conflict. Conversely, researchers suggest that relational partners who use conflict strategies such as demand-withdraw patterns tend to be low in their concern for others and tend to have chronic issues over time, making demand-withdraw conflict situations relatively destructive for relationships. Together, researchers should examine these strategies, and more, to further underscore the role mindfulness plays in conflict interactions. As well, measuring actual conflict behavior, rather than reports of strategies, is imperative. Determining whether similar findings arise after genuine conflict interactions would lend more support to the assertion that mindfulness can promote positive conflict engagement styles. Future research should also focus on other significant components/behaviors of conflict interactions such nonverbal cues, emotional expression, and attachment styles, as previous research suggests these variables have demonstrated relationships with both conflict and mindfulness (Chambers, Gullone, & Allen, 2009; Manusov, Harvey-Knowles, & Crowley, 2013; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006; Snyder, Shapiro, & Treleaven, 2012).

In conclusion, the current study offers support for a potentially important approach to improving conflict experiences. Although we focused on assessing trait-mindfulness, people can learn greater mindfulness through mindfulness courses or at-home study (see Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and the present study suggests that it is worth the effort to conduct research that involves mindfulness training. As mindfulness has already been associated with higher relationship satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2007) and an increase in relational happiness (Carson et al., 2004), we now know it is also positively related to the use of reported constructive conflict strategies and to the minimization of destructive conflict strategies, at least in some cases. Gottman (1994) claims that *how* one engages in conflict is a critical component regarding whether a romantic relationship succeeds or deteriorates. This research suggests that, by improving mindfulness capabilities, individuals might benefit from positive conflict outcomes, thus increasing the likelihood of relationship success.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

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