



Mindful Social Work?

Raf Debaene, Arteveldehogeschool University College, Belgium

Introduction by Rudi Roose, University Ghent, Belgium

Introduction

Mindfulness gets growing attention in the education and practice of social work. It is seen as an important source of inspiration for social work and as a counterbalance for the rationalization of social work. Hick states that mindfulness "is an orientation to our everyday experiences that can be cultivated by means of various exercises and practices. By opening up in a particular way to their internal and external experiences, social workers and clients are better able to understand what is happening to them in both a psychological and sociological sense. With this understanding, people are better able to see the variety of ways in which they can respond. Habitual reactions are more easily avoided, and inner peace and balance are developed" (Hick 2009: 1). Despite this praise of mindfulness as an important source of inspiration and the expectation that its popularity might expand in the next century, it is argued in this essay by Raf Debaene that mindfulness, although possibly very useful in some settings, had very little to do with social work.

Mindful Social Work?

Mindfulness is in. Originally mindfulness played a central role in the teachings of Buddhist meditation where it is claimed that "correct" or "right" mindfulness is the critical factor in the path to liberation and subsequent enlightenment. Today we know Mindfulness mainly as a kind of training sold in wellness centers or in a psychotherapeutic context as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. In these latter cases the reference to Buddhism is rather weak: mindfulness is just a practice that has its origins in Buddhism, but you don't need to be a Buddhist to benefit of the healing effects of this meditation practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn, usually referred to as the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, states: "Because I practice and teach mindfulness, I have the recurring experience that people frequently make the assumption that I am a Buddhist. When asked, I usually respond that I am not a Buddhist (although there was a period in my life when I did think of myself in that way, and trained and continue to train in and have huge respect and love for different Buddhist traditions and practices), but I am a student of Buddhist meditation, and a devoted one, not because I am devoted to Buddhism per se, but because I have found its teachings and its practices to be so profound and so universally applicable, revealing and healing." (Wikipedia: Buddhism and Psychology)

It is said that there is scientific proof for the effectiveness of these therapeutic methods. Supporters of mindfulness share the pragmatic view: you don't have to believe in Buddhist theory, just try the meditation techniques and exercises and you will experience the favorable results. At first sight this seems a very sensible, common sense view. But the problem is, certainly in this case, on what basis a certain result can be qualified as desirable, good and

favorable? E.g. when I live in stressing and painful circumstances, is it desirable that I train myself in such a way that I 'm no longer stressed and feel no pain anymore, while leaving the circumstances unchanged? From an individualistic point of view, this would be certainly a good and favorable result, but from the standpoint of human solidarity, this is not desirable.

In this article I will not discuss the claim of the effectiveness of mindfulness within the sphere of mental problems, nor the question how it works if it works. There is another phenomenon that raises questions: mindfulness is no longer restrained to the field of psychotherapy but now also seems to invade the field of social work. Mindfulness could be valuable in social work education (Wong 2010) but also in the real practice of community work (Todd 2009) and socio-cultural work (Demuyne 2009-2010) and in a whole range of social work (Hick 2009a).

As one can expect, the first valuable contribution of mindfulness is seen to lay in self-care for social workers. Indeed, social work is a hard job and sometimes frustrating. Mindfulness techniques promise to liberate one from the negative consequences of the feeling of stress, disappointment, pain and so on. By being aware of your emotions, by attentively listening to your bodily sensations, by focusing on the present situation without disturbances from the past or the future, one will be more free and armed against a burnout.

Maybe this is all true but there are obviously a few questions. First of all: as this would apply for every hard, stressing job or every person in difficult circumstances, it shows no privileged or inherent relation between mindfulness and social work. Secondly, you could wonder why one finds it acceptable that there are jobs that are so harsh and demanding that you need Buddhist psychotherapeutic techniques to stick it out. Doesn't accepting this equal blaming the victim? This seems to me a rather strange attitude for critical social work.

Secondly mindfulness is recommended because it would stimulate some important attitudes for social workers: it would help them to be open and nonjudgmental, to listen deeply, to cultivate compassion and empathy, to be present-moment oriented, to be open-minded and non-dogmatic, to be attentive to processes of and intentions for social change. (Hick 2009b, pp. 24-25) Maybe this really is an effect of mindfulness, but I see no decisive arguments for this thesis. But more important is that all these attitudes are not exclusive mindfulness attitudes: these attitudes are the aim and the result of any decent democratic education. When I read elsewhere that through mindfully practicing, through daily acts of being present, being with our feelings, thoughts and emotions, it becomes possible to recognize our humanity (Todd 2009, p. 175), I cannot but think that 'recognizing our humanity' is not such a spectacular result and moreover a sheer evidence for every adept of modern culture.

Thus follows that mindfulness brings nothing new to our insight in the moral and personal attitudes and skills we consider to be important for social workers; respect, attentiveness, open mindedness, listening carefully, having an open eye for the specificity of circumstances... are all attitudes and skills you can find in every basic work about social work training. Furthermore there is no doubt that these skills and attitudes can be effectively trained and developed in the practice of social work and in a reflection about this practice, but it is far from evident that the practice of mindfulness could be particularly beneficial here. Certainly, there are some words used in the field of mindfulness (openness, nonjudgment, acceptance (Hick 2009b, p. 4)) that have a resonance in the field of social work, especially when the word 'social' is used in the moral sense of 'humanitarian, social-minded, sociable, benevolent', but it is not clear but even doubtful that 'openness, nonjudgment and acceptance'

in a context of meditation (what mindfulness originally and essentially is) is the same as in a context of the practice of social work. There is a big difference between a meditation in ideal circumstances, in isolation or under supervision of a guru on the one hand and the practice of social work in the real world on the other hand.

My conclusion so far is that mindfulness is of no special interest for social work. And I must admit that I don't understand how it could be attractive for (critical) social work. Indeed, it focuses on inner life and has nothing to say about real social circumstances.

Of course, when you read texts of people sympathizing with mindfulness, you can find some critical remarks about our present culture and today's stressing social circumstances, but the mindfulness answer is merely individualistic: with a meditation program you will be able to manage your stressful life, without changing anything else. In this way mindfulness rather promotes the acceptance of the factual stressing society. So we should not be astonished that managers, those well known producers of stress, seek solace in mindfulness meditation, during a quarter or half an hour a day, so that afterwards they might be able to produce even more stress.

Also in another way mindfulness suggests a slight resemblance of criticism: many times it is suggested that we should seek salvation in mindfulness because of the cold rationalistic view and undertone of Western culture, where only the conceptual and the cognitive side of life receives attention, while the wisdom of the body and the emotions are supposedly totally ignored and neglected. Therefore we should take refuge in Buddhist meditation. But isn't Buddha saying that life is misery and the cause of this misery is our thirst, our desire, our striving, so that the only answer to this is not to be striving anymore? And what then is the difference with stoicism, that overly rationalist Western philosophical school, except that Stoics didn't invent much techniques to kill human desire. Of course there is nothing wrong with Buddhism nor with Buddhist monks, nor with Stoics. They give a possible answer to the problem of infinite human desire versus the finiteness of reality, and in unchangeable, fatal circumstances (e.g. when emperor Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide) a stoic or Buddhist reaction is possibly the only advisable one. But nonetheless, there seems to be an enormous difference between the life and responsibilities of a Buddhist monk and the ambitions of a social worker. Hence it is far from evident that social workers can learn a lot from the lifestyle of Buddhist monks.

Moreover the theoretical background of mindfulness, be it Buddhist or not, shows no special respect for the human body, or more exactly for the corporality of human beings, quite the contrary. Awareness is central in this doctrine. Surely we are involved in the world and react emotionally but we have to become aware of these emotions and of our bodily feelings so that we have ourselves completely under control and can become free. In this way the human body fades out and human consciousness becomes almighty.

In the context of pretended rehabilitation of human corporality, you can sometimes find a proposition like 'listening to one's own body'. This is of course nonsense, because the body literally says nothing and it is therefore very misleading and even dangerous. Because the body says nothing, all we think to hear or to learn from it is what we say to hear or to learn from it. And the words we use here are of course words within a theory, most probably the theory the guru of the mindfulness-session suggests to us, be it on purpose or not. Even when you use more cautious terms like 'bodily knowledge', you are faced with the same problem: in order to be communicable, arguable, subject of discussion, negotiable this bodily

knowledge has to be expressed in common language. Of course mindfulness adepts and critics of the so called rationalist and dualist Western culture are right when they mention the gap between reality and conceptual frameworks, but it is dangerous to think that this gap can be filled by a kind of direct bodily knowledge, because this latter 'knowledge' is incommunicable and not negotiable.

Another feature of mindfulness theory is the importance of paying attention to the present moment. Again, maybe this is useful in a therapeutic session, but it is not recommendable in social work. Of course we do not believe in eternity any more, and neither the future nor the past can dictate us what to do, but nevertheless the present moment is as such a sheer abstraction and no reality: it has only meaning and value in reference to past and future moments. Mindfulness seems to recommend here what Lipovetsky describes as a trait of the 'postmodern' condition, namely the 'presentism', i.e. the fact that the postmodern or hypermodern subject lives in the present time, in immediacy without any reference to past or future. (Lipovetsky & Charles 2004, p.89sqq.) But in contrast with mindfulness, Lipovetsky sees rather negative consequences of this.

Theories supporting mindfulness also show another trait of postmodernism, namely the subjectivist conception of reality. Reality is an illusion, the world only exists in our subjective experience of it, writes a supporter mindfulness in social work. (Todd 2009, pp. 177, 179, 180) Of course she does not deny the material world and surely doesn't share the view of extreme idealism, but clearly takes this as a reason why we should listen to and value other people's definitions of reality. In fact, this equals the postmodern relativist opinions.

At first sight these similarities with postmodernism seem odd. But maybe this is not so illogical: the unbearable lightness of postmodern relativism can find a reassuring support in the old venerable tradition of Buddhism, which at the same time with its contempt for the world and its glorification of inner life gives an alibi for relativism and subjectivist opinions.

My conclusion is therefore that although mindfulness is possibly useful in psychotherapy, it has very little to do with social work.

Bibliography

Demuynck, J. 2009-2010, November-January: Mindfulness (MFN) en vormingswerk, in: *Wisselwerk*, pp.20-23.

Hick, S. (ed.) 2009a: *Mindfulness and Social Work*. Chicago: Lyceum Books.

Hick, S. 2009b: *Mindfulness and Social Work: Paying Attention to Ourselves, Our Clients, and Society*, in: Hick, S. (ed.): *Mindfulness and Social Work*. Chicago: Lyceum Books, pp. 1-26.

Lipovetsky, G. and Charles, S. 2004: *Les temps hypermodernes*. Paris: Grasset.

Todd, S. 2009: *Mobilizing Communities for Social Change: Integrating Mindfulness and Passionate Politics*, in: Hick, S. (ed.): *Mindfulness and Social Work*. Chicago: Lyceum Books, pp. 171-185.

Wikipedia (sd). 2010: *Buddhism and Psychology*. Accessed February 9, 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_psychology>

Wong, Y.-L. R. 2010: *Critical Social Work*. University of Windsor. Accessed February 9, 2010 <<http://web4.uwindsor.ca/units/socialwork/critical.nsf>>

Author's Address:

Raf Debaene
Arteveldehogeschool University College
Department Social Work
Universiteitstraat 8
BE-9000 Gent
Belgium
Email: raf.debaene@arteveldehogeschool.be

**Social Work
& Society**