



# Scientification, Instrumentalization and Commodification of Mindfulness in a Professional Services Firm

Mira Karjalainen

HANKEN School of Economics: Management and Organisation  
& University of Helsinki: Study of Religion, Gender Studies

Gazi Islam

Grenoble Ecole de Management, and Univ. Savoie Mont Blanc-  
IREGE, France; Insper, Brazil

Marie Holm

Norwegian Spiritualist Foundation

# Research Gap

- ❖ Although there is increasing research on mindfulness, less work examines how mindfulness is adapted in corporate settings, despite concerns of its misappropriation and apparent contradictions between its origins and current applications (Purser et al, 2016; Purser & Milillo, 2015; Stanley, 2012).
- ❖ This study addresses this gap by qualitatively examining corporate practices of mindfulness among knowledge professionals in an occidental, non-buddhist setting.

# *Research Question*

How is mindfulness experienced and re-interpreted in a corporate setting?

- » within the broader question of how mindfulness is integrated into corporate practices and culture

We explore the process by which actors experience, make sense of, and discursively adapt mindfulness practices in the context of large multinational knowledge-intensive businesses.

# Mindfulness in Professional Service Firms



- » Mindfulness as an answer for two salient tendencies in current working life:
  1. Increased emphasis from HRM on subjective wellbeing of individuals (Lindström, 2016)
  2. Seen as a new fix for problems of contemporary working life:
    1. Constant hurry (Kristensen, 2018)
    2. The blurring boundaries of work, WLB (Shortt, 2015)
    3. Continuous interruptions and disruptions within work, multitasking (Wajcman & Rose, 2011)
  
- > Rhetoric of both science and Buddhism (Vu & Gill, 2018; Purser & Milillo, 2015)

# *Corporate Mindfulness in a neoliberal and post-secular society*



- » Contemporary societal neoliberal trends
  - » Emphasis on individual choice
  - » Ignoring structures of society and organizations
- » Certain kinds of professional knowledge and high-skilled professional labour is valued
  - » Need for high levels of flexibility, autonomy and self-governance, constant reinvention of oneself
- » Post-secularization - Search for authenticity within oneself, self as a source of spirituality

# Research Setting

- » A firm within the post-industrial service sector, which is marked by work intensification and demands for:
  - » flexibility (Correl et al. 2014)
  - » multi-tasking (O'Carroll, 2015) &
  - » work-life spillover (Nippert-Eng, 1996)into which a mindfulness program was initiated as a holistic solution for the resulting anxiety

Focusing on this program,, we examine the reception of mindfulness from a multi-dimensional perspective, involving the embodied experiences, meanings and justifications drawn upon by organizational members

# *Empirical Study Methodology*

We focus on three levels of mindfulness experiences, sensemaking and discourses:

- » lived experience
- » personal narrative
- » firm-level discourses

From this we draw out thematic areas of adaptation to corporate contexts:

- » scientification
- » instrumentalization
- » commodification

# Research Data

Mindfulness Breathing Space (2/2015 onward) - followed the process since the beginning

- 1) Interview data: 2 rounds (32 interviews)
  - 2) Ethnography of Organizational Mindfulness practice
  - 3) Mindfulness diaries during two weeks
  - 4) Observations and meetings
  - 5) HR documents: public and confidential
  - 6) Public Mindfulness events featuring SPFs
- > Rhetoric of Mindfulness, both private contemplation & public

## 1) Ethnographical analysis

» carnal ethnography to understand the lived, embodied moment of mindfulness practice at MindCorps

2) sensemaking around mindfulness was examined through the individual interviews and mindfulness diaries of participants

3) the rhetoric of HR and management was examined to understand corporate discourses around mindfulness

# Scientification

- ❖ the process by which a cultural or religious tradition or practice is legitimized through scientific discourse and studies to persuade the audience of its validity
  
- » *“Mindfulness is so researched academically already [---]. If some practice came from Christianity or Islam and it was scientifically studied and well tried, that could be trained in our premises too.”*
  - HR Manager, promoter and participant in the program
  
- » *“Spirituality is really strange to me, I am really scientific and mindfulness is based on facts. --- For me this is rather to improve the brain.”*
  - Consultant, participant in the Mindfulness program

# *Instrumentalization: Mindfulness as a Tool*

- ❖ the adaptation by which knowledge is reframed to emphasize goal-directedness and integrating mindfulness into business-as-usual
- Mindfulness coach giving work assignments such as a multitasking test
- *”To our ambitious goal-oriented workers—although there is also the element of peace—there is a possibility that you get to re-code you brain and thus get to another level, to become superhuman.”*
  - HR Manager
- *I: What made you become interested in mindfulness?*
  - R: Life-coping. Organizing and intensifying. I want to be more present, searching for lost stuff, keys and such, takes way too much time. [---] I want to control my life more, my use of time, time management.*
  - Senior Manager in Consultancy

# Commodification: Mindfulness as an ‘Innovative Product’



❖ transformation of ideas, services, goods and people into commodities, into an object of exchange (Appadurai, 2005)

*“2,500 years of product development by Buddhist monks”*

- Mindfulness coach

*“ This is a really old invention. Can one say invention? Anyway, this fits really well into current mishmash where all tasks are interlaced.”*

– Marketing leader, participant in the Mindfulness program

*“This is not a new innovation, but it has been wrapped very well to fit the hectic lifestyle and we need this when we live in the sea of stimuli”.*

- Manager, participant in the Mindfulness program

# Discussion

- » While a profuse literature examines mindfulness' impacts in the workplace, through largely quantitative and correlational assessments (cf. Good et al, 2016), our study contributes to a smaller but emerging qualitative and critical discussion of how the meanings of mindfulness change in its processes of adoption (Islam et al., 2017; Purser et al, 2016; Stanley, 2012)
- » To the extent that different spiritual traditions give rise to different dynamics of transformation and adaptation as they move into corporate settings, such differences can reveal important aspects of the relation of economy and wider social and cultural movements
- » Through examining the implementation of mindfulness in a knowledge-based firm, we noted processes of scientification, instrumentalization and commodification of mindfulness as analytically distinct but related processes

# *Further Research Possibilities*

- » How do the instrumentalization and commodification of mindfulness impact the personal and social benefits of practice?”
- » How does the scientific, and especially quantitative, assessment of mindfulness processes relate to the holistic and “lived” aspect of meditative experience?”
- » To what extent does the ambivalence we describe between the spiritual and the profit-driven apply across workplace spirituality contexts? (e.g. Kamoche & Pinnington, 2012; Bell & Taylor, 2003)
- » Could it be that mindfulness is able to change capitalist organizations from within, or will it inevitably be converted into a form that is palatable to current managerial norms?

# *Research Project in a Professional Service Firm*



“Mindfulness, meditation and other cognitive techniques of mind”, 2015 onward

- » The corporation started its mindfulness program, called Mindfulness Breathing Space, in 2/2015
  - » This research study began since it's debut
- » Hanken School of Economics and Helsinki University
- » Funded by the Academy of Finland and Kone Foundation
- » Now part of a research consortium WeAllFinland (University of Helsinki, Hanken School of Economics, University of Jyväskylä)