Title

Swimming against the stream?: mindfulness as a psychosocial research methodology

Abstract

In this paper, we extend psychosocial research methodology by integrating a breaching experiment, influenced by ethnomethodological sociology, with aspects of mindfulness practice, influenced by Buddhist traditions. We offer an empirical investigation of what happens when researcher-participants subtly 'swim against the stream' of normative public social conduct in a capital city setting. Our qualitative analysis explores a single case from a corpus of 172 first-person retrospective accounts of standing still and 'doing nothing' in a busy, public place. We investigate the qualitative aspects of how one researcher-participant arguably adopted a mindful, 'beginner's mind' orientation toward the flow of psychosocial consciousness. We empirically investigate this psychosocial orientation of mindfulness by integrating Wetherell's concept of affective-discursive practice with James' stream of consciousness. Mindfulness offers a specific, embodied reorientation toward psychosocial flows. We discuss the methodological implications and limitations of this reorientation for psychosocial research.

Key words

Mindfulness, psychosocial, flow, embodiment, consciousness, breaching, experiment.

Word count

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**Victoria Edwards** is an undergraduate student in Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. Victoria has returned to study following ten years' employment in Substance misuse services. Her current research is entitled 'University Challenge: How can we foster successful learning journeys for non-traditional students in a School of Social Science?' with Dawn Mannay.

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## Introduction

In this paper, we consider the potentials of mindfulness as a methodological practice for embodied investigation of psychosocial flows. We propose to expand psychosocial research by synthesizing a breaching experiment inspired by ethnomethodological sociology with methods including aspects of mindfulness meditation practice, influenced by specific Buddhist traditions. We extend previous work exploring the first-person orientation of mindfulness through empirical illustration of its psychosocial aspects (Barker, 2013b; Stanley, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). We find that the practice of physically stopping amidst the stream of the movement of people during ordinary everyday life, combined with a particular orientation toward that stream, may produce research insights concerning embodied, psychosocial experience. We begin by discussing our theoretical background and influences, before discussing our methodology, findings and concluding with a discussion of strengths and limitations.

## Psychosocial Studies, Affective Practices, and Consciousness

> We see the social and the psychological as both inseperable and individual forces that produce each other and our research gives equal emphasis to both. We map out the ways in which social, cultural, historical, and material factors help to produce and are part of subjective and psychological phenomena and, conversely, look at how social, cultural and material worlds are made up from phenomena that are, in some measures, subjective and psychological (Open University, 2012).

The term psychosocial (or psycho-social) can be used in a number of different ways (Frosh, 2003; Walkerdine, 2008). Often it indicates an interest in combining sociological and psychoanalytic ideas and practices, especially for the social analysis of embodied emotion and the dynamic unconscious, but discursive,

phenomenological, and process-based perspectives, amongst others, are also possible. Some of these perspectives are rooted in psychology (or geography or cultural studies) rather than sociology. The above definition emphasises the intertwined nature of 'psycho' and 'social' but without prescribing any particular disciplinary, theoretical or methodological stance. In the present study, we wish to extend psychosocial debates beyond an exclusive focus on, for example, the tension between psychoanalytic and discursive studies (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005; Wetherell, 2005), to encompass a broader range of influences.

Wetherell's (2012) recent work allows for multidisciplinary psychosocial research. She interweaves theoretical concepts, giving center stage to the idea of *affective practices* as a way to integrate "the somatic, discursive, situated, historical, social, psychological and cultural" (p. 4). Wetherell defines affective practice as "*embodied meaning-making*" (p. 4; emphasis in original), including the emotional and feelingful aspects of human conduct, along with the discursive, material, and spatial. We agree that affective-discursive practices cannot be "deciphered into separate 'psycho' and 'social' lines" (p. 139), not least because affect is the "domain of the social that is embodied" (p. 159). The metaphor of 'flow', where the body in social practice is a "flow immersed in other flows" (p. 31) and embodied meaning is situated amongst complex, intersecting "multimodal flows" (p. 102) of meaning (e.g. somatic, discursive, phenomenological), captures the dynamic movement of bodies during psychosocial actions.

We want to extend psychosocial debates about unconsciousness to include discussions of the conscious psychosocial subject. James (1890) famously used the metaphor of a 'stream' of consciousness to capture its dynamic flow (see Billig, 2012).

> Consciousness … does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life* (James, 1890, p. 239; emphasis in original).

James' ideas can be extended to incorporate more psychosocial texture. Consciousness is arguably a 'boundary' phenomena which traverses psychological and social worlds, such that what we consider to be 'inner' and 'outer' dimensions of life are mutually constitutive (Stanley, 2012a). Research in critical and social constructionist psychology understands consciousness as a relational, social and historical function but often neglects its phenomenology (Gergen, 2009; Volosinov, 1986; Shotter & Billig, 1998). Early and modern Buddhist traditions of mindfulness (insight) meditation provide guidance for investigating phenomenal consciousness. In early Buddhism, as in James (1890), consciousness is "not a subject, but an activity, a process, an event recurring moment after moment" (Olendzki, 2011, p. 67). It is not a place, but a dynamic, changing function.

The vision of the person and the sense of subjectivity in early Buddhism are commensurate with contemporary social science and cognitive science. Most Buddhist traditions understand subjectivity as a 'co-emergent' phenomena, constituted by multiple 'co-arising' conditions: non-unified, decentred and unstable (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991). The idea that the self lacks a stable, unifying

core ('not-self') and that conscious reality 'co-arises' dependent upon mutually constituting conditions (dependent origination) has resonance with contemporary traditions of phenomenology, systems theory, and process philosophy (Brown and Stenner, 2009).

Methodologically, psychosocial studies adopt an experiential perspective toward emotion, feeling, and sensation (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2012); the embodied use of material objects (e.g. clothes, equipment); and the physical spaces people occupy (Finlay & Langdridge, 2007). Such research often requires innovation, such as visual methods (Reavey, 2011), autoethnography and memory work (Langdridge, *et al*., 2012). The present study is influenced by recent innovations in mindful research (Nugent *et al*., 2011) and adventures in qualitative experimentation (Brown *et al*., 2009). We similarly want to foreground "our embodied participation in the process of research" and "break with the relentless functionality of the discursive psychological project of prioritizing the "action-orientation" of language over the experiences which it describes" (*ibid*., p. 512, p. 506).

To study psychosocial consciousness mindfully, we suggest researcher-participants need to 'swim against the stream' of normative activity and awareness; a metaphor used in the early Buddhist tradition to capture the existential orientation of Buddhist and mindfulness practice (Batchelor, 2010, p. 125).

## Mindfulness, Beginner's Mind, and Breaching Experiments

In psychology, mindfulness is treated as an object of study, rather than as a research methodology (Baer *et al*., 2006). Grossman (2011) says psychologists have been too quick to *measure* mindfulness and should develop their phenomenological understanding of its practice. When applied practically, it is often a religious, spiritual or therapeutic practice (Barker, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). However, some researchers recommend it as a study skill (Dixon, 2004; Stainton Rogers, 2011) or as a social research methodology (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998).

There are debates about meanings of mindfulness, *sati* (the Pali word translated as mindfulness) and various related concepts (attention, awareness, consciousness) (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Meanings of mindfulness and meditation have changed historically and depend upon their cultural and social contexts (Stanley, 2014a, 2014b). Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as an awareness that arises when one pays attention: intentionally, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to moment-to-moment experience. We will develop an empirical account of this orientation, using the concept of 'beginner's mind', taken from Zen, as a starting point. "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few" (Suzuki, 1970, p. 1). The basic practice involves becoming 'open-minded' in the sense of noticing one's expectations and pre-conceptions, turning toward any difficulties experienced, and letting them go. This is similar to the phenomenological 'bracketing' (Depraz *et al*., 2003). We investigate the embodied aspects of this 'simple awareness' or 'bare attention' (Thera, 1962). However, secular definitions of mindfulness, to be applied in psychosocial research, need to be supplemented with attention to: ethics, memory, and psychosocial awareness.

The secular concept of mindfulness arguably lacks ethics (Stanley, 2013). We define

mindfulness as an "*embodied and ethically sensitive practice of present moment recollection*" (Stanley, 2012b, p. 65). Ethical sensitivity here means a concern for oneself and others (Shotter, 1997). The word *sati* is not only about paying attention nonjudgmentally, but also involves an ethical sensitivity to the consequences of how we pay attention, act and live.

We reclaim the connection made in *sati* between awareness and memory. Present moment recollection can include becoming aware of the act of remembering an event from the past (Analayo, 2006).

We may assume mindfulness is equivalent to introspection, but there are important differences (Stanley, 2012a). Mindfulness can be *external*; an awareness of what is happened around us through our senses. This element is a crucial condition for mindfulness to be adapted as psychosocial, rather than solely psychological, research.

What are the social functions of mindfulness? Schipper (2012) argues mindfulness may enhance reflexivity in sociological research through recognizing "multiple forces of socialization" (p. 213). McGrane (1994, p. 4) describes "ventures in de-socialisation", or exercises in "social de-conditioning". His students of the sociology of work were instructed to "do nothing, to be un-employed, for ten minutes" (p. 13) in a busy, public place. Moore (1995) suggests the concept of 'desocialisation' is problematic and that Zen Buddhist training involves a 'resocialisation': learning new habits and a 'dereifying' perspective on the social world. However, we find concepts of *reflexivity* and *embodiment* more useful.

Pagis (2009) says insight meditators alternate between *discursive self-reflexivity* (language-based, abstract and symbolic; becoming aware of inner dialogue and self-talk) and *embodied self-reflexivity* (anchored in the reflexive capacity of bodily sensations, used as indexes to psychological states and emotions). Preston (1988) similarly applies Bourdieu's notion of habitus and says Zen practice is a "body-based training, rooted in experience" (p. 99). It "slows, erodes, and makes visible the usual reality-building processes (personal and collective) used by all groups in everyday life" (p. 123). Foucault (1978/1999) similarly contemplated the "new relationships which can exist between the mind and the body and, moreover, new relationships between the body and the external world" (pp. 112-113) through Zen meditation. But what does this look like empirically?

To explore this question, we follow Garfinkel (1967) by applying mindfulness as a practical method of displaying what makes common sense, everyday life possible.[1] He investigated how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely reproduced and maintained.[2] The problem with common sense, it being common, is that we fail to see it. Breaching experiments are one way of 'rediscovering' everyday life scenes and how they work, by exposing taken-for-granted 'background

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[1] Preston (1988) suggests ethnomethology is like a Zen version of sociology (for further parallels between Buddhism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, see Barnes and Moss, 2008; Moore, 1995; Wilson, 1984; Buttny and Isbell, 1992; Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991).

[2] Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is partly informed by Schutz's social phenomenology, in its concern to study the practical methods through which members of a society routinely construct their social worlds as being distinct from their conduct (Heritage, 1984).

expectancies' of our routine conduct.

To achieve this exposure, Garfinkel (1963, p. 187, cited in Heritage, 1984, p. 78) recommends: "start with a system with stable features and ask what can be done to make trouble". For Shapiro (2013), breaching experiments reveal "embodiment and body norms of our culture" and the "visceral, corporeal reactions … used to demonstrate the power and fragility of social order" (p. 191) (e.g. decreasing distance between faces during conversation). The experiments often produced what Garfinkel (1967) termed 'socially structured affects', such as anxiety, shame, guilt and indignation. His experiments were designed to produce bewilderment, consternation, and confusion amongst researchers and participants.

Our breaching experiment departs from Garfinkel's in three ways. Firstly, our aim is to study the constitution of the flow of *psychosocial consciousness* through researcher-participants themselves, and how it is intertwined with social conduct, rather than social order *per se*. What happens when a researcher swims against the stream of their psychosocial consciousness? Our breaching of social norms aims to be subtle and unobtrusive; breaching the researcher-participants' world more than the worlds of passersby. Secondly, we integrate breaching with mindfulness practice to allow for the first-person investigation of embodied subjectivity, along with an ethical orientation toward that subjectivity, notoriously lacking in the classic breaching experiments. How might a mindful orientation to experience allow for an *ethically sensitive* study of psychosocial flows? Thirdly, a specific aim and focus is to examine the *orientation* of mindfulness. How might we specify and characterise this orientation?[3]

**Methodology**

This study involved a breaching experiment in a public place in a UK capital city.

*Researcher-Participants*

Between October 2012 and November 2013, 172 researcher-participants carried out the experiment in the city centre of Cardiff (Wales, UK). All but one were undergraduate students studying modules in social psychology at Cardiff University. Each researcher-participant submitted a retrospective fieldnote description of what happened. The first and third authors took part in the study.

*Procedure*

The basic instruction was to go somewhere busy, during the day, in a public place, stop, stand still and do nothing for 10 minutes. Researcher-participants were told to conduct their experiment within a minimum group of three students ('breaching buddies') and to alternate their social positions:

  i.  *Breacher*. By 'doing nothing', I mean do nothing: no shopping, no 'waiting' for someone, no 'doing being ordinary', no 'being a tourist', no checking

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[3] Shotter (2009, 2011) similarly describes a bodily-enacted 'reorienting' activity, in which he is touched or moved by immediate, pre-reflective 'felt discriminative awareness'.

your mobile, no 'people watching'. Drop all your normative interpersonal signals. Just stand there. Keep paying attention to what happens with a 'beginner's mind': a kind, gentle, and curious noticing of each moment. Can you maintain an embodied awareness of each moment, as it happens?

ii. *Timer*. Stand at a distance from the breacher so that you can see them but they cannot see you. Time them for 10 minutes. When the time is up, let them know.

iii. *Observer*. Stand at a distance from the breacher so that you can see them but they cannot see you. Your main task is to make sure the breacher is okay. Watch them to see if they give any sign of distress, or signal to end the breach. Observe people around the breacher. Watch out for any harassment or 'anti-social behaviour' (e.g. groups of children, teenagers, or young adults – male or female). Watch out for any officials who may interrupt the breacher (police, security guard). If you are concerned, you have the power to stop the breach by approaching the breacher.

We gave the following additional instructions:

"'Doing nothing' does not mean you are required to ignore ('blank') people if approached. If approached by others, it is up to you what to do. You may choose to stay silent, but you may equally choose to speak. If you are approached or concerned for your safety, you can (i) suspend the breach and act normally, explaining yourself to the person; (ii) raise your hand to attract the attention of your breaching buddies; (iii) produce one of two 'identity cards', saying: (a) DOING NOTHING; (b) I am a Cardiff University student doing an experiment. If you have any concerns about the experiment, please contact my supervisor Dr. Steven Stanley on (029) 2087 4853.

Once you are finished, you should not speak to one another. In silence, you should go somewhere nearby, which is suitable for writing down your individual accounts of what happened, without conferring.

Being influenced by ethnomethodology, this field experiment does not involve: making specific predictions; proposing an experimental hypothesis; testing cause/effect relations; studying changes in factors/variables; predicting or controlling the behaviour of yourselves or others.

Your task in breaching and writing the fieldnote is *not* to try explaining or theorizing about what was happening, but to remain aware of what is happening, notice moment-to-moment experience, notice and let go of any expectations, and remember what happened so that you can write a detailed, descriptive account of it."

While students were not trained in meditation, the instructions provide some basic training in 'beginner's mind'.

*Ethics*

The *School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee* of Cardiff University approved the study 'Doing Nothing: Standing Still in a Public Place' for

undergraduate students. The study was not a compulsory requirement for the assessment on the module and did not form part of summative assessment. Non-participation did not affect progression on the module, grades, or course credit. Students were *recommended* to take part in the study to learn about social psychological research practice, but were not required to do so. There was no detriment to students who suffer from social anxiety/phobia, panic attacks, or indeed any other student, deciding not to participate in the experiment.

Ethical guidelines were primarily concerned with protection of researcher-participants, particularly the 'lone', young, female undergraduate student – being the majority (80%) of researcher-participants – doing something potentially counter-normative (i.e., nothing) in a public place. This informed the requirement to complete their breaching experiment within a minimum group of three students.

Students who participated gave consent to act as researcher-participants and for the data to be used for teaching and research purposes. They were also told that they could withdraw their participation at any stage of the study. The experiment did not require participants to be deceived about the aims and purpose of the study. Fieldnotes were anonymised and made confidential – disguising possible identifying details – so that students were only identified to each other and the academic researchers by student number.

*Data*

Researcher-participants submitted a written fieldnote account to Bristol Online Surveys, a web-based survey tool, using an open-ended qualitative field. They were asked to describe what happened during the breaching experiment, descriptively and in detail. "Where, when and how did you conduct it? What happened? What did you notice, inwardly and outwardly? Did you discover anything new? Did you notice any challenges or difficulties?" 172 fieldnotes were submitted: 61,665 words across 59 single-spaced type written pages.

*Analysis*

The rich, detailed and extensive fieldnote corpus provided multiple potential avenues for qualitative inquiry. We began somewhat generically by looking for patterns and themes in the corpus, loosely following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The authors took differing routes into the data, variously identifying: narrative patterns capturing commonalities and differences between fieldnotes; descriptions of embodied self-reflexivity; interactions between breachers and passersby; discursive constructions of accounts as social actions, rather than as representations of reality. We found that identifying themes risked flattening the shifting, fluid patterning *within* one-off individual fieldnotes. Therefore, we selected a single case, written by the third author, displaying what we speculatively believed to be a mindful orientation toward the breaching experiment, whilst also illustrating common themes. We analysed this fieldnote using Wetherell's (2012) affective practices and James' (1890) stream of consciousness. We gave attention to: the action orientation of the fieldnote; how it put together various resources (discursive, embodied, sensual, material); how its orientation to psychosocial consciousness compared with other fieldnotes.

Depending on one's research orientation, such documents are memories, retrospective accounts, phenomenological descriptions, verbal reports, or auto-ethnographic fieldnotes. Wetherell (2012) argues qualitative research in the social sciences relying "solely on after-the-event narratives to scope out the nature of situated affect will form only a partial view" because attention is "thrown onto what is passing through the individual's body and mind" (p. 96). But arguably psychosocial research, along with any other kind of social research, involves researchers working at least partially from a 'first-person' perspective, as lived from within (Varela & Shear, 1999). What passes through the individual body and mind of the researcher is arguably profoundly psychosocial, being composed of embodied, social and cultural phenomena. We explored the potentials and limits of a mindful psychosocial research orientation, as it relates to these shifting and changing realities.

## Single Case

On Wednesday 10th October 2012 at 12.30pm I was the second person from a group of five undergraduates to complete my 'breaching experiment'. I stood still for ten minutes in the middle of pedestrianized Queen Street, opposite Marks and Spencer, Cardiff. With my hands in my pockets, I looked straight ahead of me at a tree. A fellow student timed the experiment with two others attending and watching, all from a distance. I found it difficult to gauge time throughout the experiment. To begin with I felt very conspicuous, uncomfortable and anxious. I decided to avoid making eye contact with people because I didn't want to appear confrontational nor invite conversation. After the initial strangeness of standing still in a fairly busy place had worn off a little I started to relax. The tree in front of me was the most amazing autumnal display of colour. Although the tree was fairly laden there were leaves on the ground around it too and I marveled at how many it must have had originally. The empty space around me seemed to grow and I noticed less people, this led me to try to notice people, everyone seemed to be moving quickly, lots of them had brown paper Primark bags. Instead of feeling conspicuous I started to feel invisible. A couple of people passed by very close to me, within what I would call my personal space, as if they couldn't see me. I noticed sounds seemed much clearer, I heard a siren some way in the distance, and people chattering nearby. I had a feeling of being watched and felt as though I would like to apologise for any discomfort I was causing. I felt a part of everything and separate from it all as well. I heard the birds, stall holders shouting, an alarm going off, and footsteps. Heeled shoes sounding on the pavement. I felt a hand on my arm, a grey haired man, who looked worried, asked if I was okay. As soon as I replied and said I was fine he looked embarrassed and walked away. I couldn't help smiling. I felt very grateful and quite warm toward people in general. I became aware then that I was standing in the middle of a busy shopping street grinning, and stopped. I felt neither hot nor cold which surprised me and I didn't feel fidgety or impatient as I had expected to. I feel calm and relaxed and detached and alone. A woman approached me from my left and stood in front of me and in a Welsh accent, asked: "Where to is Primark?" She had brown hair, was approximately middle aged, her features were quite weather beaten. I felt she was standing too close to me. I replied: "Keep going, on the right". She walked on. It crossed my mind how ubiquitous Primark is. I noticed a woman giving out leaflets and people avoiding her. Then my time was up. I learned that if you stand still the charity workers and other people who try to interact with people on busy shopping streets leave you alone.

## Findings and Discussion

This piece of writing does not record a 'naturally occurring' situation from everyday life, such as a telephone conversation. Instead, it is partly an artifact of social science understanding and practice; being an account of an experiment and undergraduate course-relevant task. We can 'naturalise' it further as a social action: a pragmatic and

'action oriented' first person retrospective account of a recently occurring breaching experiment (Heritage, 1984). It is put together as a 'worked-up', chronological narrative of a distinct and recently prior event (the date, time, and location are given), with a brief summary overview ('I stood still for ten minutes'), mostly in the past tense (but shifting once to the present tense, 'I feel calm and relaxed and detached and alone'), offered as a response to a request to write a fieldnote description (the author describes what they 'noticed' and 'learnt'). In the words of Goffman (1979), this writer does 'identity work' as an undergraduate student and adopts the 'footing' position of an author and principle character of a factual narrative description of a prior event. She arguably constructs herself as possessing unique adequacy to describe the moment-to-moment shifting and changing contents of the stream of her personal ('I'), embodied ('stood still'), psychosocial consciousness (feeling 'watched' and 'invisible'). We can attend to the functionality of this account in the sense of how it puts together a variety of resources to describe a psychosocial event and establish a particular orientation.

*Orientation to the Task*

For a significant number of writers, the task was simple but not easy, like mindfulness itself. 59 (34%) writers oriented to the task as wholly challenging/uncomfortable/difficult, whilst 15 (9%) veered between descriptions of difficulty and descriptions of ease/comfort/relaxation, as evident in this case. Two (1%) writers expressed or oriented toward a difficulty in 'letting go' of expectations about what was going to happen, and being present to what actually was happening. Two others claimed non-understandings of the 'aim' of the experiment (although arguably 'aimless', but see below). 3 (2%) complained about doing the task itself.[4] 10 (6%) described the task as fun/entertaining/enjoyable, either entirely or momentarily.

To over simplify, the 'content' (or 'what') of the experience (pleasant or unpleasant) described does not determine whether or not the account can be considered mindful. While the task might be unpleasant, one can still be mindful of it. The 'orientation' (or 'how') of the account toward the experience being described establishes its mindfulness, or otherwise (Kerr *et al*., 2011).[5] Indeed, most practical applications of mindfulness assume the continuation of difficult experience during mindfulness practice. So, when Victoria not only willingly carries out the requested task without complaining, but describes moments of relative enjoyment ("I felt very grateful and quite warm toward people in general"[6]), this does not qualify her account as mindful. Indeed, Victoria's account also contains descriptions of difficulty. She was among nine (5%) who used a 'three part list' (Jefferson, 1990) as a resource, generally to

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[4] "I felt somewhat annoyed that this was included in the module, and slightly helpless, as not doing it would result in me looking like a 'bad student'" (this account veered between difficulty, enjoyment, mind wandering, and invisibility). "Slightly annoyed that I have to stand still for ten minutes, as I am a busy body who is very impatient and finds it difficult to do nothing when I have things to do". "When Dr. Stanley first told us about the experiment I really did not want to do it as I thought it would be extremely embarrassing and awkward. After some persuasion from my friends who needed me to be in their group I decided to participate as I was curious to be a part of the experiment".

[5] One writer, who offered what might be considered a mindful account, described the task as "boring" and that "nothing was really happening" ("What the hell will I write in my fieldnotes?").

[6] Her 'smiling' and 'grinning' are implied to be pleasant bodily affects, unlike others for whom laughing and smiling feature in accounts of difficulty (e.g. 'terror', 'nerves', 'nervous' anticipation).

summarise the psychological difficulty of the task being described:[7] "To begin with I felt very conspicuous, uncomfortable and anxious".[8] Victoria does not describe in detail her difficulty. Jefferson (1990) suggests lists have a "historically-sensitive relation to just prior talk" which is evidenced here, in the just prior difficulty of "gauging time", and also the post-list avoidance of eye contact. *Quality*, rather than *valence*, establishes an account's mindful orientation.

*Beginner's Mind and Expert's Mind*

Researcher-participants did not carry out the experiment uniformly and the fieldnotes displayed many divergent practical understandings of the purpose of it. A key distinguishing pattern is between accounts displaying an 'expert's mind' (63, 37%) as opposed to a 'beginner's mind' (15, 9%). In the present context, an expert's mind – described as a 'doing' mode of mind by Teasdale (1999) – most prosaically involves: predicting the experiment will produce 'reactions' amongst passersby; looking for those 'reactions'; and evaluating the experiment's success.

By contrast, a 'beginner's mind' – described as a 'being' mode, 'decentering' or 'metacognitive awareness/insight' by Teasdale (1999) – involves: noticing and letting go of any expectations about what might happen; noticing what is actually happening; receptively allowing pleasant, unpleasant and neutral experience to come and go. Baer *et al.*'s (2006) psychometric study suggests 'describing/labelling' inner states with words is a facet of mindfulness.[9] A key feature of the 'simple awareness' aspect of mindfulness practice is the act of 'noticing' what is happening in phenomenal consciousness without evaluation, judgement, or comparison (Crane *et al.*, in press).

This case arguably illustrates Stanley's (2012c) theoretical description of mindful practice: "We are pausing and suspending our usual routine activities of reactivity, shifting our gaze to observe their conditions of becoming, in a succession of present moments which are always changing" (p. 76). Kerr *et al.* (2011) suggest mindfulness practice culminates in an 'observing self': a witnessing attitude or stance toward experience. This is evocative of an earlier period of psychology, when psychologists could be 'observers' of their own experience. James (1890) famously defined introspection as "the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (p. 185). Victoria similarly adopts a position of an observer, adopting a watchful stance toward what she claims happened both within and without. In the words of James (1890), she captures the multiple 'perchings' of consciousness as it rests on various attentional objects; the 'flights' of consciousness, when it moves from place to place, are much more difficult to notice and capture (in James' words, like turning up the gas to see how the darkness looks). Victoria's retrospective description is not only of 'inner' mental life, however, but also of 'outward' social conduct and events. She is not describing the contents of her mind as such, but rather describing a delimited psychosocial event, after previously interrupted the flow, or stream, of conduct and made this memory the object of her retrospection. The recent event is

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[7] Other examples include "apprehensive, nervous and self conscious", "uncomfortable, out of place and unusual", "I felt very self-conscious, restless and embarrassed".

[8] But see also "I feel calm and relaxed and detached and alone". Another similarly wrote: "I was insignificant, invisible and unimportant".

[9] Kerr *et al.*'s (2011) qualitative diary analysis goes further, categorising mindful diary entries as 'reperceptive' (non-judgmental, without identification, without reaction, intimate, meta-awareness).

bound temporally (ten minutes of 'clock time') and spatially (located on a busy city centre high street). It is an account of a subtle breaching of normative public life, rather than an attempt to describe something routine and everyday (like forgetting a name, James (1890)).

However, there is a paradox here. The 'beginner's mind' of mindfulness seems to have its own expectations and assumptions.

For example, Victoria arguably displays 'demand characteristics' (Orne, 1962) by constructing an account of a 'good' undergraduate student. Along with all research-participants, including the first author, she practically orients to what is expected of the experiment, and provides an account which responds to this expectation. Victoria mostly understands the experiment as a request to describe what she 'noticed' during the ten minutes. This noticing is not total or indiscriminate but selectively describes specific features of the claimed content of her psychosocial consciousness. The description involves her visual attention moving from object to object (a tree, leaves on the ground, empty space, people, Primark bags). Then, her auditory attention takes over, as if seized by a series of sounds in the environment (a siren, people chattering, birds, stall holders shouting, an alarm, footsteps, heeled shoes sounding on the pavement). Victoria also describes a couple of normative social interactions, which are not subject to breaching (she responds to, rather than ignores, the passersby), including indirect and direct reported speech: one a response to her standing still (the 'grey haired man'), the other a more everyday exchange (the 'Welsh woman').

While these 'noticings' may appear natural and self-evident, and simply reflective of 'what happened', from an affective practice perspective, Victoria's account is action oriented and responsive to the local contingencies of writing a fieldnote for a social psychology experiment. It is productive of multiple identity positionings (undergraduate student, breacher), category bound activities (standing, noticing, feeling, hearing), emotions (anxiety, discomfort), descriptions of the material environment (Marks and Spencer, the street) and features of the natural world (tree, leaves, birds). 'Beginner's mind' is therefore not strictly without expectations, but instead involves specific understandings of what counts as 'noticeable' in this context.

Action orientation and demand characteristics may imply Victoria is inventing her account, fabricating it for the purpose of being a 'good student'. While this is a possibility, debates about the veracity of the account are not relevant to our concerns. But sole attention to functionality risks neglecting features of the content of the account itself, including its embodiment.

*Embodied Awareness*

Arguably the account is simultaneously both an affective practice – an occasion of embodied meaning-making – and an example of embodied research.

This affective practice has collective and western cultural precedents and resonances in, for example, artistic presencing (e.g. Abramovic, 2012); meditation 'flash mobs', where a group of meditators spontaneously appear in a public place, sit down and begin to meditate as a collective; and street entertainers who pretend to be statues. Whilst affective practices usually involve movement and flow, Victoria describes the

experience of stopping and standing still amidst the flow of the movement of people in a busy public place, specifically a consumer space. While solitary, it is an affective practice with culturally recognisable and intelligible elements.

The act of momentarily stopping amidst the movement of people in a busy public place is self-evidently embodied. On this occasion, the practice is being conducted as embodied research, in the sense that the body of the researcher-participant is made explicit as a resource for the conduct of the research, as well as being topicalised within the account itself. Victoria's account lacks some of the detailed and sometimes intense descriptions of bodily affect present in other accounts. Nevertheless, her report shows how her body is put together alongside accounts of the task itself, temporality, social identity positioning, spatial orientation, the natural and material setting, sensory awareness (visual, auditory, tactile), social relations, and affect.

Victoria describes standing still, with hands in her pockets, looking straight ahead of herself at a tree. 19 (11%) others described focusing their visual attention on an object (e.g. tree, bin or pillar). She describes her body as being taken up amongst patterns of social interaction with others. Her body is explicitly topicalised (avoiding 'making eye contact with people', 'I felt a hand on my arm', 'smiling', 'grinning', 'I felt neither hot nor cold', 'I didn't feel fidgety or impatient', 'I felt she was standing too close to me') and indirectly oriented to throughout the report as alternately conspicuous ('I had a feeling of being watched') and invisible ('I started to feel invisible'). Bodily awareness, so central to mindfulness (Holzel *et al.*, 2011), is intimately related to descriptions of the activities of other people and the material and natural space surrounding her. 42 (24%) others described feeling watched/self-conscious/exposed (whether in the presence of real or imagined others), 18 (10%) feeling invisible/ignored/unnoticed, and 7 (4%) veering between the two. Claims of invisibility were often accompanied with descriptions of reorientations in phenomenal awareness, such that sensory awareness was claimed to be altered or transformed, perhaps even heightened (16 (9%)). In this extract, activities of seeing, hearing, and the sense of the body in space are reflexively commented upon.

Perhaps predictably, the corpus includes descriptions of time and temporality, including some descriptions of transformations of the phenomenal sense of the passing of time. 42 (24%) described time as proceeding slowly, or slower than they expected it would. While Victoria says she had difficulty "gauging time" throughout the experiment and that she did not feel "fidgety or impatient" as she expected she would, there is a sense of stillness in the midst of movement ("everyone seemed to be moving quickly"). Of the 8 (5%) who said time went quickly or quicker than expected, one wrote: "I felt as I though I was in a time-lapse film where everyone around me had been sped up and I was remaining still".

Victoria's account, taken as a whole, puts together a series of 'snapshots': fleeting, momentary, present moments which make up the "phenomenal now" (Stern, 2004). Stern (2004) suggests present moments are the "small but meaningful affective happenings that unfold in the seconds that make up now" (p. 8). In his words, Victoria is retrospectively describing 'process units' lasting between approximately one and ten seconds. He argues that present moments "form around events that break through

ordinariness or violate expected smooth functioning" (p. 34).[10]

## Conclusion

We have explored our combined interest in psychosocial worlds, embodiment, consciousness and mindfulness. We have not only been interested in the account as a social action or discursive construction, but also in the orientation made possible through this style of experimentation. We are not suggesting that mindfulness allows the researcher to step outside of psychosocial life, but rather to come into a relationship of 'intimate distance' with what is happening in their embodied, psychosocial consciousness (Stanley, 2012a).

Mindfulness potentially overcomes one of the challenges of embodied research: the potential for expectations about what is expected to happen, and assumptions about what is happening, to overshadow inquiries (Brown *et al*., 2011). Mindfulness training may help researchers to momentarily suspend their expectations and to more intimately encounter the actual moments of psychosocial life, as they are lived.

A mindful approach offers a warmth, intimacy, and disclosure on the part of researchers unfamiliar to most experimental social psychologists. Many experiments in social psychology often lack the personal presence of researchers and participants (Billig, 1994, 1998). Mindfulness is one way of 'repopulating' reports of experiments with the voices of people. Indeed, Victoria's account illustrates what Billig (2012) calls 'warm hearted' psychological writing.

However, the awareness of mindfulness may not provide complete disclosure, and while a breaching experiment may suspend certain social norms, it may also reinforce and conceal others. We suggested that undergraduate students had volunteered to be 'researcher-participants', but institutional hierarchies and staff/student power dynamics may mean a 'recommendation' is heard as a command (Stanley and Billig, 2004). The power of university academic staff, with a few noted exceptions, is largely hidden and unacknowledged in the accounts. Power dynamics and social inequalities might be operating 'behind the backs' of even the most mindful of practitioners.

We have reflected on the complex position of the psychosocial researcher in a qualitative experiment, drawing on aspects of mindfulness practice. We propose that a plurality of perspectives, including those informed by alternative traditions such as Buddhism, along with cross-perspective dialogue, is more likely to ensure the vitality of psychosocial research than a single dominant orthodoxy.

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[10] "[S]ubjective experience must be sufficiently novel or problematic to enter consciousness and become a present moment" (*ibid*., p. 34).

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