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Mindfulness, Mindlessness, and Adaptation

Abstract

The contention of this article is that human communication is by its very nature mindful and that many communication behaviors have been mistakenly labeled as mindless. Paramount to this case is that rather than being a bipolar construct, mindfulness occurs in degrees such that communication can be viewed as having greater or lesser degrees of mindfulness. This contention is supported by arguing that adaptation in interactions occurs because of mindfulness, and that adaptation is pervasive in communication. The review of how adaptation is mindful includes a discussion of adaptive complexity, adaptive consciousness, scripted adaptations, and evaluation of adaptation for its accuracy, applicability and effectiveness

Disciplines

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Comments

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Abstract

The contention of this article is that human communication is by its very nature mindful and that many communication behaviors have been mistakenly labeled as mindless. Paramount to this case is that rather than being a bipolar construct, mindfulness occurs in degrees such that communication can be viewed as having greater or lesser degrees of mindfulness. This contention is supported by arguing that adaptation in interactions occurs because of mindfulness, and that adaptation is pervasive in communication. The review of how adaptation is mindful includes a discussion of adaptive complexity, adaptive consciousness, scripted adaptations, and evaluation of adaptation for its accuracy, applicability and effectiveness.

Consciousness, Mindfulness, Mindlessness, and Adaptation

The context for the discussion in this paper is human communication and the general question addressed is the degree to which human communication is mindful, not in the current popular notion of mindful, but in terms of how we communicate. In addressing this issue, the case is made that people continually engage in adaptive behaviors during their interpersonal interactions and that such adaptations require consciousness and mindfulness. Mindfulness is conceptualized as cognitive process involving consciousness and attention. Searle (1994) writes “Consciousness should not be confused with attention. Within one’s own consciousness there are certain elements that are at the focus of one’s attention and certain of others that are at the periphery of consciousness (p. 94).” According to Searle then, consciousness appears to apply to both that which is attended and that which is not. In this paper, mindfulness is that part of consciousness that is attentive. When we focus attention on our self, our thoughts, our plans, our decisions, or the world around us, we are being mindful. Baars (1988) uses the term “voluntary attention” to describe the mechanism that makes things conscious. For Baars, choosing among options involves voluntary attending to conscious decisions. In this way voluntary attention is equivalent to mindfulness. Within the communication context, mindfulness functions to direct people’s attention to a conscious consideration and selection of communication options.

Much of human behavior is habitual and automatic, occurring unconsciously. Individuals engage in many behaviors without any particular sentience, awareness, intentionality, planning, or decision-making. But sometimes automatic processes are disrupted and the unconscious gives way to the conscious. When people’s actions result in errors, discontinuities or violations of expectations (in essence when the automatic is disrupted) it can provoke consciousness (Baars, 1988). We can walk without consciousness of where we place each foot, but if we stumble on

something, we become conscious of our next step. Disruptions to our environment or impediments to our plans can also evoke consciousness. If the sidewalks are covered in ice and snow, each step requires focus on where to step and the process of walking increases the need for consciousness. Mindfulness represents these times where we are required to be conscious of our behaviors and interpersonal interactions are contexts which require mindfulness. However, the level of automaticity and consciousness while engaging in interpersonal communication is not without debate.

In a study on mindfulness and marital satisfaction, Burpee and Langer (2005), indicate that “mindlessness is based in the past” and that “It results in insensitivity to context and perspective” (p. 43). Such a conceptualization of mindlessness dictates that individuals lacking such sensitivity would be bound to fail in adapting to the moment. On the other hand, mindfulness, when turned to others, contributes to empathy and perspective-taking (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007) which provide a foundation for adapting to others (Redmond, 1989). Adaptation is a mindful act in which individuals take into consideration information about another person or a given situation and alter their behaviors. The focus of this article is on the relationship among mindfulness, mindlessness, and adaptation in communication interactions.

Mindfulness

The term mindfulness has spiritual-philosophical origins and psychological-sociological applications. The spiritual-philosophical conceptualization of mindfulness has generated the greater amount of publications often focused on the application of methods such as meditation to achieve awareness of the present moment. Mindfulness, as taught in Buddhism, provides a framework for personal training and therapy (Mikulas, 2007). The social science applications

include the measurement of mindfulness and the role mindfulness plays in relationships. Among the qualities associated with the mindfulness as social science are: regulating, directing and bringing one's complete attention to the existing moment; being context sensitive; having heightened awareness; being nonjudgmental; having curiosity, being open and accepting toward the moment; and actively drawing novel distinctions. These qualities are embodied in the operational definitions and measures of mindfulness (Bishop, Lau, & Shapiro, 2004; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller et al., 2006). For example, Langer created a four dimensional measure of mindfulness that taps into novelty seeking, novelty producing, flexibility, and engagement which was found to correlate with marital satisfaction (Burpee and Langer, 2005). Burpee and Langer concluded that mindfulness creates mental engagement, openness to new experiences, awareness of new contexts, malleability, efforts to find mutual solutions in conflicts and consideration of a spouse's point of view which then increase satisfaction. Extending Burpee and Langer's description, mindfulness *is* mental engagement with the immediate interaction; particularly, social information processing. Mindfulness, in this sense, provides the basis for adapting to one's partner.

Mindfulness and mindlessness are often treated as dichotomous concepts: if a person is mindful, then the person cannot be mindless; and if the person is mindless, the person is not being mindful. However, mindfulness might be better thought of as a process rather than a state; that is, a person engages in mindful activity rather than reaching a point of mindfulness. From this conceptualization, mindfulness can be thought of as varying in intensity and scope—we can become more mindful and less mindful. From this perspective, some activities previously regarded as mindless are actually mindful, just to a lesser degree than other mindful activities. For example, Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) originally claimed that participants allowed

others to cut in line to make a small number of photocopies because the participants acted mindlessly. However, Folkes (1985) replicated that study and found that those waiting in line were mindful, just less complete than under ideal circumstances. Motley (1992) uses examples of slips of the tongue as evidence of how encoding is often nonconscious (mindless), therefore producing errors. However, the assumption is that the error is in mindless word selection rather than a possible mechanical issue involving the brain's failure to correctly produce the chosen word. Indeed, when individuals make such errors they are quick to correct them indicating mindful monitoring of their own messages. There are of course times where we are not aware of our own words, and these might be the times that truly reflect mindlessness.

Being highly mindful during a conversation requires development and implementation of goals, awareness of other's goals, attention to the message (both encoding and decoding), analysis, interpretation, attention to and interpretation of nonverbal and situational cues, etc. Given the depth and mental activity needed to be highly mindful, it is understandable that such a mindful state is unlikely to occur during a conversation. The belief that it is not possible for individuals to accomplish such wide-ranging activities during interpersonal interactions has led to the conclusion that much of communication occurs mindlessly (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000; Hample, 1992; Langer, et al., 1978). However, despite the speed and complexity with which messages are exchanged during conversations, individuals might adopt a good-enough method for handling such interactions (Ferreira, Bailey, Ferraro, 2002). People do just what is good-enough to successfully navigate a conversation incurring only a basic level of mindfulness which is mistaken for mindlessness. The ability to create impromptu, grammatically developed sentences as quickly as occurs during a conversation appears to be grounded in some automated processes that don't require conscious consideration of each word choice. On the other hand the

pattern of immediate and precise adaptation to each other's utterances that occurs during dialogue led Bavelas and Coates (1992) to conclude that conversations must be mindful.

Mindlessness

One contention forwarded in this article is that all human communication is, by its very nature, a mindful activity. While numerous human activities can be conducted without consciousness, in a mindless state and some underlying processes to communication are automatic, engaging in interpersonal communication both reflects and requires some degree of mindfulness. In addition, most interpersonal communication involves adaptation to the situation and specifically to the conversation partner. In Ziman's (2006) discussion of intersubjectivity, he implicitly recognizes this when he writes, "Sustained interpersonal communication is necessarily a trading relationship, even if only of limited empathic depth (p.33)." This is contrary to other communication scholars who see mindlessness occurring frequently in human communication (Burgoon, Berger, and Waldron, 2000). Burgoon et al. provide examples that they claim represent mindlessness such as "What I need is a list of specific unknown problems we will encounter" (p. 106). While the statement's self-contradiction is amusing, it really doesn't reflect mindlessness; rather, it reflects poor thought and weak expression skills. Further, while worded poorly, the writer obviously wants help in reducing ambiguity. More importantly, the very act of communicating such a message involves some mindfulness about that ambiguity and need for information. That recognition leads to the formation of and acting upon a goal; resulting in the formation of a message directed toward someone with the desired information. In essence, as Ziman (2006) argues, the speaker is attempting to engage in trade which involves "anticipatory action by each party, and thus an intersubjective fabric of mutual expectations (p.

33).” Producing poor or nonsensical messages should not be taken as an indication that the speaker or writer is operating in a mindless state or has actually failed to adapt.

In some conversations, particularly phone calls, when a speaker is engaging in a long monologue, the listener might periodically provide some almost automatic backchannel responses such as “huh-huh” particularly when the listener is engaging in another activity (watching TV, playing a video game, or reading). The periodic vocalizations by the listener appear to be automatic and mindless; particularly when the listener is unable to remember what was said when tested by speaker. The caveat here is that the person is not really listening, human communication is not really occurring. While the speaker is other oriented and sending messages, the listener is not really attending to the messages. The listener’s responses are not responses to the speaker and therefore aren’t mindless responses, they are indications of inattention.

The case for mindlessness in communication largely originated in a study by Langer et al. (1978) in which individuals successfully gained compliance to cut ahead of others to make photocopies regardless of whether they provided a bogus or real reason. The authors claimed that those in line let others go ahead because they acted mindlessly, failing to analyze the legitimacy of the reasons. Folkes (1985) failed to confirm those results in a replication of the study and concluded that “although everyday social interactions may often be less than completely mindful, they do not appear to be as mindless (automatic) as might have been surmised..” (p.604). Another study examining the impact of “automaticity” on requests for a piece of paper from someone studying in the library failed to support the mindlessness of responses (Kitayama & Burnstein, 1988). Kitayama and Burstein (1988) concluded that “automaticity cannot be inferred straightforwardly from overt responses (or vice versa) (p. 223).

Unfortunately, Langer et al.'s initial claims are still accepted as evidence of mindless human communication. An overall significant problem with the use of compliance gaining observational studies is that only the wording of the messages is considered and manipulated for impact on mindfulness. Human interactions, especially interpersonal ones, involve application of social cognition that goes beyond the words. For example, face and politeness theory suggest that the action of letting someone make copies ahead of a person might not be the result of failing to be mindful, but rather an action predicated on being seen as polite and kind—of maintaining a positive face, of adapting to the situation and the other, not the strength of the requester's argument. Just the fact that individuals allowed others to move ahead in line to make their copies means the receivers engaged in some level of decoding and mental processing of the request—they were not mindless. Shouldn't an actual mindless response be no response at all? In a refutation of Folkes, Langer, Chanowitz, and Blank (1985) argue that mindless activity didn't mean the absence of cognitive processing, just the absence of reasoning. If that is the case, then the phenomenon they are examining is not mindlessness, but reasoninglessness. Even then, complying to an "unreasonable" request might be the "reasonable" thing to do if a person want to maintain positive face.

The above studies as well as others on mindlessness often examine the effectiveness of a given message to gain compliance as an assessment of whether the receiver has engaged in mindful cognitive activity. However, the studies don't examine the creation of messages as a mindless activity that was reflected in the example from Burgoon, et al. (2000). One reason for this failure might be methodologically based on the quandary produced when you tell someone "don't think about pink elephants." Trying to experimentally stimulate mindless messages is

paradoxical. Nonetheless, if mindlessness exists in human communication, it should be as prevalent in the encoding of messages as it is in the decoding of messages.

Adaptation

Mindlessness has been equated with overlearned behavior, automatic or routinized responding, scripted responses, self-absorbed orientation, and uncritical acceptance of information. Mindlessness is said to occur when messages are entirely script based (Langer, Blank, & Chenowitz, 1978). In other words, individuals simply engage in or recite predetermined, non-adapted scripts. As mentioned, the evidence of this is the failure to act on information that the researchers believe listeners should attend to if they are being mindful. Contrary to this notion is the proposition that all symbolic messages represent a form of adaptation to others and therefore cannot be considered mindless. Directing spoken words toward another person (in contrast to talking to oneself) reflects an underlying belief by the speaker that the words have meaning to the listener. Words by their very essence are accommodations to the people to whom we address them; words are social and have their origins in interactions with other people. Such interactions result in the acquisition of what Vygotsky referred to as “social speech”. Activating this common social speech when interacting with others means, at least minimally, that the speaker has adapted.

Adaptation has been identified as a direct reflection of consciousness (Baars, 1988). For Baars, adaptation represents a conscious experience that falls between accommodation and assimilation (in the Piagetian use of these terms); that is, adaptation would not occur when information is highly predictable nor when it is overly confusing or chaotic. Baars sees adaptation occurring when individuals have some sense of the context or situation, but are still some uncertainty. In most day-to-day communication interactions, people operate in contexts for

which they possess some level of information certainty, but need to adapt to the remaining uncertainties. For example, conversations with a friend generally have low levels of uncertainty, but the topic and direction of any given conversation are somewhat uncertain, necessitating some degree of adaptation.

Almost all interactions between humans using a shared symbol system involve a form of adaptation by the very nature of evoking a shared symbol system. Every word we speak has its origin in other people. The act of speaking to another person means the speaker has adapted or engaged in an other-oriented act (Motley, 1990). Directing spoken words toward another person (as differentiated from self-talk) reflects an underlying belief by the speaker that the words have meaning to the listener, unless they are engaging in aimless, random, and truly mindless communication. Words by their very essence are accommodations to the people to whom we address them. When we initially express such words to someone who does not share our language, we believe we have adapted until we discover we have misrepresented that person in our mind, and consequently in the selection of our words. If we are competent in the other person's language, we might engage in code switching, and select words from the other's language—an obvious move to adapt.

Adaptation can be examined from a number of perspectives including complexity (the degree of adaptation), consciousness (level of conscience effort placed in adapting), application of scripts (selecting from a repertoire of scripts appropriate to a given situation), and evaluation (evaluating the failures and inaccuracies in adapting).

Adaptive Complexity

While the very act of speaking reflects basic adaptation, adaptation varies in its complexity. Messages vary in adaptive complexity because we have many choices available to

us. We select from a vast pool of words (vocabulary and jargon) which can be placed in multitudes of structures (grammar) combining them to express various examples, illustrations, and references accompanied by a vast array of nonverbal behaviors. We have a significant amount of information that we can choose to share or not share; in essence, we mindfully select information in response to the situation. In a study of content adaptation in everyday interpersonal interactions, respondents (N = 166) were given questionnaires to complete on their own after having an uninterrupted conversation with someone (Redmond, 2005). They were asked about the occurrence of different types of adaptive behaviors including self-disclosing, elaborating or explaining, withholding or avoiding, use of examples/comparisons/analogies, altering language choice, and personal referencing. Participants received one of four forms, each asking about adaptation in response to different activators (knowledge of the partner, nature/history of the relationship, partner's mood/behaviors, and the location/circumstance). Ninety-two percent of those reflecting on the impact of the nature and history of the relationship reported specifically sharing information, including their emotional state, during their interaction. Eighty-one percent reported referencing mutually-known people and referencing information known to the partner was reported by 81 percent of the respondents. Significant amounts of adaptation were reported for the other three adaptation activators on these and other adaptive behaviors. In sum, significant amounts of content adaptation were identified in everyday interpersonal interactions reflecting significant mindfulness. Mindless interactions would be devoid of such adaptation.

In spontaneous interactions, individuals cannot premeditate their messages and therefore the level of complexity in their adaptations is likely to be somewhat superficial. In developing a theory to explain language comprehension, Ferreira, Bailey, Ferraro (2002) recognize that during

rapid exchanges that occur during a conversation, individuals are engaging in comprehending and producing messages simultaneously. They conclude that “The goal of the comprehension system might be to deliver an interpretation that is just good enough to allow the production system to generate an appropriate response; after all, it is the response that is overt and that determines the success of the participants’ joint activity” (p. 14). Hewes (2009) also provides elegant examples of group interaction being driven by socio-egocentric thinking. Given the rapidness with which interpersonal exchanges occur, individuals are limited in how mindful they can be in both the production and analysis of messages. The interchange might even appear mindless to an external observer. However, the very fact that the participants create a successful joint activity is because of their abilities to mindfully adapt to each other’s messages (Bavelas & Coates, 1992). This good-enough approach means the adaptation is likely to be more simple than complex, but it will still be mindful in terms of being immediately engaged with a present situation.

Adaptive Consciousness

If interpersonal interlocutors operate without great depth but just “good-enough” to interact successfully than they might also lack consciousness of their own adaptations. For example, the exchange of “How are you?” discussed earlier seems mindless and thus apparently involves little or no conscious adaptation. Saying “Hello” to someone who has just said “Hi” appears scripted and mindless. But providing a response indicates some degree of mindfulness (failing to provide a response--being oblivious, would indicate mindlessness); the individual has adapted by choosing to say “Hello” and not “*Guten Tag,*” or “*Buenos Dias.*” The response intrinsically reflects the recognition of a need to react, and to select and enact a particular script—to adapt to what has just occurred. While “Hello” occurs with little conscious

consideration, adaptation occurs along a continuum from a very low level of consciousness to well deliberated messages where each aspect is carefully considered for its effect on the anticipated listener.

Adaptive consciousness occurs in the development of a speaker's goals and in a listener's attempt to understand the intention or motive of the speaker, both accomplished sometimes through imagined interactions. Can speakers produce a symbolic message for others to hear without having the intention of doing so, and being aware of their own attention? The question is of course, circular. Motley (1990) argues that intention in human communication is characterized by an other-orientation, beginning with a goal, followed by a decision to act or not act upon that goal, and finally, the intention to encode and transmit the message to another person. Messages are motivated, involve decisions, and are produced to affect others. Motley does accept that we might not be conscious of our goals or of our decisions to act on those goals. Nonetheless, there would appear to be some mindfulness involved in taking an other-oriented action.

As listeners we assume that speakers say what they say for a reason, and we often try to surmise those reasons. This notion is the fundamental to attribution theory and speech act theory. Holtgraves (2008) recently tested the speech act theory and found that individuals assess the intention behind a speaker's utterance and he observed that "conversationalists are mutually oriented toward an understanding of each other's communicative intentions" (p. 628). He does advocate, however, that detection of intention is an automatic process. Despite many scholars believing that people often mindlessly create messages, listeners appear to regard messages as purposeful, intentional, and mindful. Listeners ask, "Why did she say that to me?" and "What did he mean?" or "What is she after?" Asking such questions reflects a high level of

consciousness on the part of the listener. Given the speed with which conversation turns taking occurs, listeners are limited in their analysis and interpretation at the moment. A number of factors stimulate listeners' increased analysis of intention and purpose such as increased uncertainty caused by expectancy violations. To even experience violation arousal, individuals must be engaged in some degree of mindful monitoring and evaluation of the present communicative situation.

Scripted Adaptations

How can communication be adapted and scripted at the same time? Some communication interactions involve selecting the right script to follow in a given situation. Once that script or program has been selected, then its operation is somewhat routine, and *less* mindful, but not mindless. The application is mindful in the sense of *minding* the situation. For example, seeing a person you don't know for the first time evokes the adaptation of going into a "getting acquainted script"; the selection of the script represents adaptation to the situation ("This is a stranger I don't know. What should I say?") and subsequent initiation of a general getting acquainted protocol, following a script. Similar scripts can be pulled up and applied to various situations as needed. The number of scripts any individual knows varies and certainly expands as we mature. Calling these "scripts" however is misleading. We very rarely engage in an interaction where every line spoken is predetermined and memorized. Scripts are actually templates and frameworks from which we build conversations. Evidence of this can easily be seen in the fact that no two interactions are alike. Every getting-acquainted interaction is unique, even when they follow the typical getting acquainted template. When we ask strangers where they are from, their answer often redirects the conversation or leads to seeking additional information relevant to their home. The fact that such variations in conversations occur,

demonstrates that they are not mindless but can more accurately be described as more or less mindful. The exception, true and complete mindlessness, might be found in conversations with people suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease where the same conversation might be repeated over and over again. These conversations are readily identifiable and distinguishable from normal conversations because one participant appears to fail to adapt, unfortunately making communication automatic and mindless. While sometimes a failure to adapt, it can also be a failure to retain acquired information and recognize there is no need to seek it again.

Evaluation of Adaptation

Adaptation can be evaluated for its accuracy, applicability, and effectiveness. Failure to adapt or errors in adaptation are usually considered an indication of mindlessness. However, making a mistake might not mean an individual has not engaged in mindful activity, but rather, that it was just done poorly. The level of mindfulness could impact the degree of accuracy of any adaptation. On the other hand, other factors can contribute to inaccuracy beyond that of mindfulness, such as, working from false, incomplete, or misleading information; analyzing factors that unknowingly change; or encountering situations beyond an individual's realm of knowledge and experience. Biased or distorted perceptions, stereotyping, prejudice, biased language, self-centeredness, and errors in imagined interactions used in developing and evaluating contingency plans can also contribute to inaccurate or inappropriate adaptations. Recognizing that a person is talking to an eight year old child might result in adapting the language to fit that of a typical eight year old, only to find out later that the child is a prodigy attending high school and that the initial adaptation was inappropriate. Nonetheless, adaptation and mindfulness occurred, it was just inaccurate.

Attempts to be mindful might actually create error that would not have occurred otherwise. Burgoon et al. (2000) posit that the semiautomatic conduct often found in interpersonal interactions actually frees up the cognitive resources to conduct mindful analyses. In essence, automatic behaviors give us time to think about what is going on at the time it's occurring. Unfortunately, such "diversion" during a conversation can actually be a listening barrier if one's mind engages in tangential thoughts that result in inappropriate responses to the last statement made by a conversation partner. What appears to be a mindless response since it fails to acknowledge the previous comment is the result of mindful activity. As discussed earlier, mindfulness is sometimes conceptualized as attentiveness to the present, thus the failure to stay focused on the immediate interaction is a failure to remain mindful. But listening involves interpreting, which means mindfully examining that which is seen and heard in the present.

Unfortunately, external observers can only guess about whether a given comment is an adaptation or not. In Redmond's (2005) study of adaptation, participants often reported holding back information as a form of adaptation. Guerrero and Affifi (1995; 1998) have found individuals avoid certain topics in conversations when they want to protect themselves or the relationship, when the partner is unresponsive, or when the topic is seen as inappropriate. To outside observers, some mindless behaviors might actually represent withholding information or avoidance of certain topics. A mother might ask her teenage son why he is late, to which he grunts or gives an impervious response. The teen appears to be acting mindlessly, but indeed might be adapting to the situation with a strategy of withholding an answer that could ended up with the teen being grounded.

Conclusion

One goal of this article is to challenge the seemingly unbridled acceptance that human communication is riddled with mindlessness, and to suggest as an alternative, that human communication is more mindful than recognized. The issues addressed in this article are not new but the pervasiveness of mindlessness appears to have become accepted by default. The premise seems to be accepted that much, if not most, of the cognitive activity during interpersonal interactions is automatic and mindless. While the production of sentences following rules of grammar during a conversation provide evidence that automatic, unconscious processes are occurring, this does not mean the speaker is operating mindlessly or without consciousness. Hopefully the issue raised in this discussion is not just an issue of definitional differences—what one scholar labels mindless, another scholar labels mindful. The intended issue involves recognizing that human communication does not occur without a level of consciousness and mindfulness. Inherent in this claim is that mindfulness occurs as a continuum not as a bipolar construct. Some communication behaviors require and reflect more mindfulness than others. Evidence to support this contention is drawn from reflections on the pervasiveness of adaptation in interpersonal interactions. Adaptation occurs because a person is mindful of some reason to adapt what is said or not said. At a minimum, speech represents a mindful adaptation of a need to create spoken symbols that a listener can interpret. Other forms of adaptation, such as deciding to avoid a topic, are more complex and difficult to observe, but nonetheless represent a mindfulness of the potential effects of any given message. Every symbolic word that is spoken has its origin in another person; that means all spoken words are by their very nature social. Each time we speak we are connecting with the human race, we are reaching outside ourselves, we are adapting, and we are mindfully reaching out to others.

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