Paradoxes of mindfulness: The specious promises of a contemporary practice

Elgen Sauerborn, Nina Sökefeld and Sighard Neckel
University of Hamburg, Germany

Abstract
The growing popularity of Western secular mindfulness programs in recent decades has frequently been criticized by sociologists. Mindfulness in this line of argument is viewed as the quintessential neoliberal and capitalist technology of the self. However, this – quite justified – functionalist critique does not account for how mindfulness is increasingly being used to escape growth driven-based optimization pressure. We therefore show, on the basis of our extensive empirical field research, how mindfulness is negotiated as a response to contemporary crises and social change, how this phenomenon can be understood as a symptomatic, contemporary cultural phenomenon. From our ethnographic data from 121 hours of participant observation in mindfulness courses in Germany and six interviews with mindfulness teachers, as well as analysis of relevant literature, we reconstruct four paradoxes of mindfulness. With reference to this, we show to what extent mindfulness is a program of specious promises. For in the final analysis, the broad accessibility and popularity of the program are based on the fact that its application is just as paradoxical as the social problems to which it promises to be a solution.

Keywords
emotions, ethnography, meditation, mindfulness, therapeuticization

Introduction
In today’s world, many people are questioning their life’s purpose. It’s nearly inevitable. Look at the climate crisis, conflicts, wars, there’s suffering everywhere. Due to global interconnectedness, all of us are exposed to so much distress all the time. But still, we have our own stressful lives to manage, we’ve got work, families, lots of responsibilities. We can’t really change anything about this, and yet, we feel afflicted every day. The solution to this is mindfulness. Mindfulness will
help to lift those burdens from us, layer by layer, the stress, the exhaustion, the sadness, and below all that, we find our personal potential for peace and contentment. (Mindfulness teacher during a workshop)

It has been evident for some time that mindfulness is no longer restricted to Buddhist meditation practices. In the current Western reception, mindfulness is celebrated as a specific therapeutic program (Salmenniemi, 2017) as well as a lifestyle and general relation to the world. Striving for a mindful life and the increasingly popular practice of meditation (Carvalho, 2021) have now gained so much unreflective popularity, especially among the urban middle class, that distancing oneself from it is almost demanded by the decorum of sociological analysis. The critique of the current reception of mindfulness is so comprehensive and far-reaching that it has itself already become a subject of inquiry (Walsh, 2016). For analyses of contemporary society, mindfulness certainly represents a highly gratifying object: A spiritual practice is being removed from its religious context and instrumentalized by companies like Google, SAP, and Lufthansa for the sake of increased performance and healthier bodies (Forbes, 2019; Kucinskas, 2019; Purser, 2019; Wilson, 2014) – a prime example of neoliberal, capitalist optimization practices, grist for the mill of sociological critique. This critical perspective, also referred to as ‘McDonaldizing Spirituality’ (Hyland, 2017) or, now classically, as ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser & Loy, 2013), is not new (Hickey, 2010; Stanley, 2012; see also Walsh, 2016) and does not detract from the popularity or growing reception of mindfulness. People from diverse milieus, classes, and age groups swear by the effects of the programs and report lifestyle changes, newfound perspectives, and success in solving everyday problems. At the same time, the dissemination and discursive reinterpretation of the program is rising. Mindfulness thus exemplifies an increasing subject-centeredness that finds expression in discourses of well-being, self-care, minimalism, the ideal of a singular, sustainable, and healthy lifestyle (Einstein, 2007), and even the marketing of relevant products (Wilson, 2014). Ironically, corporate and performance-oriented contexts are deeply permeated with such discourses. For example, a furniture store, which is actually known for mass-produced goods, focuses on mindful living (Ikea, 2021), and a sporting equipment manufacturer offers mindful running meditations in its training app: ‘training mindfully will ensure an athlete is preparing, performing and recovering in the most efficient and effective way possible’ (Nike, 2018).

Criticizing such applications of mindfulness as forms of instrumental, neoliberal work on the self is thus thoroughly justified. However, it is not sufficient to comprehensively understand the current status of the phenomenon. Rather, it seems that precisely the simplified, secular version of mindfulness is hitting a social nerve even beyond the idea of optimization – one that has long felt the effects of neoliberalism on subjective lifeworlds to be problematic.

Despite the large number of recent scholarly publications on mindfulness, a comprehensive sociological analysis of its practice in secular, everyday contexts has been largely absent (an exception is, e.g., Islam et al., 2022). Critical meditation studies in particular often remain limited to functionalist critique and are ‘not interested in the empirical study of meditation’ (Carvalho, 2021, p. 1262). For this reason, we intend to analyze contemporary mindfulness sociologically, focusing on its practice and taking into account its socio-economic contexts, without falling into functionalist reductions.
Using extensive qualitative data, we aim in this article to clarify how mindfulness is a response to contemporary crises and social change in everyday practice, and how it can be understood as a symptomatic, contemporary cultural phenomenon. Drawing on ethnographic research in the form of participant observation in mindfulness workshops, interviews with mindfulness teachers, and analysis of relevant literature, we trace narratives and practices that are characterized by paradoxes and at the same time make the broad reception of the program more understandable. From our genuinely sociological perspective, we do not seek to measure the efficacy of mindfulness or assess how far removed it is from its origins (cf. Arat, 2017; Pagis, 2019). Rather, we discuss mindfulness as a social phenomenon, applying a sociology of emotions lens. We show how it is currently practiced, in which discursive context it is negotiated, and to what extent this is linked to economic, cultural, and political issues. Using our broad data set, we elaborate on the extent to which mindfulness occurs to be a program of dazzling promises that, however, proves specious in practice. Our research shows that mindfulness is as paradoxical in its application as the social problems to which it promises to be an answer – and that this is precisely the reason for its broad social compatibility and popularity.

**Mindfulness: Origins and current reception**

Mindfulness is a state of mind or consciousness that goes back to a type of Buddhist meditation and can be understood as a contemporary, secular application of practice. Accordingly, many basic elements of popular mindfulness programs – breathing calmly, meditating, being kind to oneself and others – are by no means new but can be understood as ancient wisdom or even as ‘timeless truths’ (Schaffner, 2021) about work on the self. Yet mindfulness has evolved in recent decades into much more than just a technology of the self; it can be understood as part of a cultural current that Kucinskas (2019), for example, calls the ‘contemplative movement.’

In its more recent widespread application in Anglo-American and European settings, mindfulness has been simplified and broken down into a rather straightforward and widely comprehensible training (see Forbes, 2019, p. 15; Purser, 2019, p. 8). Its reception is broad and ambiguous (Islam et al., 2022) and is typically ‘accompanied by a universalizing rhetoric’ (Stanley & Kortelainen, 2019, p. 23) regarding the human capacity for mindfulness. Of particular prominence is the program MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction). It includes various meditation, body, and therapeutic reflection exercises developed and introduced into the Western mainstream by molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn. The state of consciousness sought through programs such as MBSR primarily involves attentive, nonjudgmental awareness and observation of one’s emotions, sensations, and thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). It is about living in harmony with oneself and the world and feeling this affectively: ‘Most of all, it has to do with being in touch’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 3). This should enable and convey a holistic view of body, mind, and feelings, ‘to calm down enough to enter and dwell in extended moments of deep well-being and relaxation, of feeling whole and wholly integrated as a person’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. ix). The explicit goal of the program is to reduce stress, whose neuropsychological and physiological triggers form an important basis of explanation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, pp. 287ff.). In these discourses, one also frequently encounters references to the human brain’s lagging evolutionary adaptation to the demands of modern civilization.
According to this, the human body in its stone-age naturalness is not evolutionarily adapted to the modern world, which biologically overtaxes it with its proverbial fast pace, complexity, and performance orientation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, pp. 287ff.). This biological argument, among other factors, has prompted numerous sociologists in recent years to take a critical look at the program.

**Mindfulness as an object of a critical sociology**

To explore mindfulness from a sociological perspective means first to understand it as a social phenomenon that is embedded in larger social contexts. Late modern societies are characterized by a reflexive approach to feelings (Burkitt, 2012; Lupton, 1998), the body (Crossley, 2006), and the self (Rose, 1990) that is supported by technologies of the self. This is a typical phenomenon entailed by the processes of personalization, psychologization (Sennett, 1977/2017), and therapeuticization (Illouz, 2008; Salmenniemi, 2017; Wright, 2008), which have become more important especially since the second half of the 20th century. As Lupton (1998) notes, ‘emotional management and regulation, paying constant attention to how to best deport oneself emotionally, is an integral aspect of reflexive work upon the self’ (Lupton 1998, p. 92). Similarly, this subject-centered culture also entails a greater emphasis on a notion of ‘care of the self’ (Foucault, 1986) that encompasses practical technologies as well as a reflexive approach to body, mind, and emotions. In the Foucauldian tradition, this can be understood as a form of neoliberal governance of the subject, and it evinces numerous overlaps with the ‘self-care’ (Ward, 2015) sometimes overused to the point of cliché in the context of self-help literature as well as on social media. Mindfulness is a typical phenomenon entailed by these developments, and it is also discussed as one part of a broad societal health and wellness trend (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). Working on the body in support of one’s health encompasses not only sports and nutrition but also aspects of mind–body connection as well as physical and mental relaxation. These socio-cultural conditions provide the framework for the application of body-centered technologies of the self like those included in mindfulness programs.

The popularity of therapeutic approaches and their entailed reflection on the self and its feelings have been the subject of sociological criticism since their emergence. For example, this development was denounced decades ago because of its inherent focus on the self and an associated normalization of narcissism and depoliticization (Lasch, 1979; Rieff, 1966). Mindfulness is currently encountering similar criticism: Because of its potential for individual emotion management and improvement of well-being and concentration, mindfulness in its Western reception is often used to prevent stress and burnout. As a result, in many social scientists’ and economists’ assessment, this program represents a neoliberal and individualized technology of the self (Forbes, 2019; Purser, 2019; Stanley, 2012) that exemplifies a response to the competition- and performance-driven states of burnout and exhaustion that are typical of late capitalist economies (Ehrenberg, 1998/2016; Han, 2015; Neckel et al., 2017). This perspective has become particularly popular under the term ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser, 2019; Purser & Loy, 2013). In this line of argument, mindfulness can be seen as the prototype of an individualized technology for counteracting social suffering. Undoubtedly, shifting responsibility to the
individual for the management of one’s own feelings conceals and trivializes the social, political, and economic significance of subjective feeling, exhaustion, and depression (Ehrenberg, 1998/2016).

Moreover, mindfulness has long since become a commodity. As a manifestation of the commodification of religion, which Carrette and King (2004) call ‘selling spirituality,’ the narratives and practice of mindfulness are extremely profitable. Courses and continuing education trainings are by no means offered free of charge. The same is true for apps, some of which require payment or partial payment, such as ‘Headspace’ or ‘Calm,’ which promise uncomplicated mindfulness lessons in everyday life. Due to their sometimes high costs, access to such offers is in turn dependent on economic resources. Likewise, a paradoxical understanding of consumption and optimization often emerges in mindfulness discourses. They are usually characterized by attitudes critical of consumption and optimization, yet they also fuel both (Irizarry, 2015) and contribute to the commercialization and marketing of mindfulness by producing numerous goods. This economic use of mindfulness includes magazines, scented candles, hygiene articles, apps, and so forth. Since pretty much any action can be performed mindfully, any item can also acquire the label ‘mindful.’ Products thus gain a different value through various aspects of mindfulness. As elaborated by Boltanski and Esquerre (2020), they are ‘enriched’ for their value of goods.

Beyond the functionalist critique of mindfulness

The critique presented above views mindfulness programs as neoliberal optimization measures and discusses mindfulness exclusively in terms of its social function. While numerous current examples show that this argumentation is still valid, it does not suffice for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This is because the economic application of mindfulness, fixated as it is on increasing performance, does explain its deployment in entrepreneurial (e.g., in Tan, 2014) as well as political (Sauerborn, forthcoming) contexts. Nevertheless, it is often neglected that mindfulness is used by many who want to evade such optimization pressure as stems from the capitalist logic of growth. Many advocates of mindfulness even take up and advance the critique of its instrumentalization for economic and productivity-enhancing purposes themselves, as is the case with Ronald Purser, who coined the term ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser, 2019). It is furthermore ignored that many practitioners ascribe to mindfulness a potential to transform not only the self but also social and global ills (Walsh, 2016). We aim to move beyond the functionalist limitations of that critique by focusing our ethnographic research on the diverse and in part contradictory secular practice of mindfulness. Rather than limiting our study to the question of how such practices contribute to the production of neoliberal subjects, we regard the use of mindfulness techniques as an example of therapeutic engagement in everyday life, shedding light on the ‘contradictory and incoherent nature of subjectivation’ (Salmenniemi, 2017, p. 614). Existing ethnographies on various forms of meditation (Carvalho, 2021; Pagis, 2019) focus primarily on the practice in meditation centers, which in contrast to everyday life appear as ‘laboratories’ (Carvalho, 2021; Stanley & Kortelainen, 2019) of meditative affects. The focus of our analysis, by contrast, is on the application of mindfulness in
contexts that are less ‘sterile’ (Pagis, 2010) and isolated and in which meditation represents only one aspect, albeit a central one.

Delving into mindfulness practice from a perspective of emotions allows us to examine underlying conceptions of embodied subjectivity that are constructed and negotiated through body techniques. This is because understandings of emotions are closely tied to cultural perceptions of the self and the body (Lupton, 1998, p. 85). As Wacquant (2004) has shown in his ethnography of boxing, the enduring practice of specific body techniques deeply modifies the relation to one’s body in changing one’s physical and mental dispositions, including the experience of emotions and pain (Wacquant, 2004, p. 95). Even though mindfulness encompasses a completely different set of body techniques, much of this notion can be applied to meditation practice. From this angle, we explore the question of what promise the teachings of mindfulness hold, such that so many individuals choose this time- and money-consuming practice beyond the workplace and without explicitly spiritual intentions. Conceived as a subject- and emotion-centered approach to social problems, mindfulness contains tensions not only from a functional but also from a systematic perspective. These tensions raise questions about existing sociological critiques, while also enabling new sociological insights. Thus, our inductive, empirically grounded analysis consists of an examination of mindfulness practice and discourses, and four paradoxes inherent in the current manifestations of mindfulness. These paradoxes characterize and shape the ambiguous nature of the practice and comprise contradictions in the context of (A) narratives of optimization and aimlessness, (B) standardized solutions for individual problems, (C) neuroscientific foundation and anti-cognitive knowledge of the body, and (D) the glorification of authenticity and manipulation of emotions.

**Methods**

To research an affective and bodily practice such as mindfulness, we chose to pursue ethnographic fieldwork, in particular participant observation. Our ethnographic approach allowed us not only to gain a comprehensive insight into the field of mindfulness, but also to account for its nonverbal, embodied, and emotional facets (Wacquant, 2015). The data collection and analysis are based on the methodological and empirical ideas of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and in particular of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Our findings draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between November 2019 and April 2021. Overall, we participated in 121 hours of mindfulness training, divided over nine workshops held in Germany. In addition, we had informal meetings and conversations with other participants. We also conducted six one- to two-hour interviews with mindfulness teachers. The events we attended included shorter evening sessions as well as one- to three-day workshops and two multi-week courses. Some of the workshops concentrated on specific topics or fields such as work, art, or self-care, but there was a focus on events committed to the MBSR approach and thus to stress reduction in everyday life. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was beginning during our fieldwork, most activities in the area of mindfulness shifted to virtual space, so that two courses took place via the video telephony platform Zoom. Ethnographic records in the form of memos (Charmaz, 2006) as well as interview transcripts constitute the central
The data set for our analysis. We attended the workshops as regular participants but obtained consent from the teachers prior to registration and disclosed at the beginning of each course that we were researchers studying the topic.

The field study was supplemented by a qualitative discourse analysis of relevant materials such as self-help literature, magazines, websites, and newsletters. By subscribing to magazines, newsletters, and social media accounts, we aimed to immerse ourselves into the field beyond the attendance of singular events. In this, we focused on publications and documents that explicitly deal with mindfulness. In addition to ‘classics’ of mindfulness training, such as literature by prominent teachers like Jon Kabat-Zinn, content from German-language issues of the lifestyle magazines Flow Magazin, Happinez, and Hygge published during the survey period were also included in our study. We analyzed the collected data by using coding techniques of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). While we started with initial coding to categorize and compress our complex data set, we were able to conduct deeper analyses in the subsequent processes of focused and axial coding. To avoid too biased analyses, we established an ‘interpretation group’ (Berli, 2021) in which we regularly discussed and compared our results.

Discourses and practice of mindfulness: Paradoxes of a specious promise

Mindfulness practice and discourse: An overview

Mindfulness programs are taught and practiced in diverse contexts. Numerous private and public organizations such as companies, government agencies, universities, and schools offer courses on it. In addition, independent coaches pass on the teaching in a wide variety of formats, which are booked and paid for by individuals themselves, unless health insurance companies or employers cover the costs.

Many of the workshops are tailored to specific topics. They might aim to improve performance at work or in sports, for example, or to achieve a more mindful perception of art, music, or food. The MBSR courses for stress reduction mentioned above are especially prevalent.

Despite the wide range of applications in various contexts, mindfulness programs, and especially MBSR courses, are highly standardized in practice. Nevertheless, the length of the courses varies; they may last from just a few hours to days or even several weeks. A classic version of an MBSR course in the ‘Kabat-Zinn tradition’ (Arat, 2017, p. 170) is an eight-week introductory stress reduction course that encompasses weekly group sessions as well as consistent independent practice by participants. Each week there is new ‘homework’ for daily training. In addition to various sitting and walking meditations, one of the central techniques is the body scan, in which one’s entire attention is directed to bodily sensation, gradually feeling into every corner of the body, the tips of the toes as well as the knees, the ribs or the inside of the skullcap. One mindfulness teacher described the body scan as a way to learn how to be ‘at home again’ (Memo 05) in your body. The point is to register the bodily sensations with attentive openness, but without judging them, thus giving rise to a comprehensive perception of one’s own body. If thoughts or emotions arise, they are to be noticed, but not held onto. Overall, the
negotiation of the relationship between the self, emotions, and the body is a key reference point in mindfulness discourse and practice. In Western societies, both the body and emotions have long been perceived as ‘unruly’ in the sense of being ‘visceral and primitive’ (Lupton, 1998, p. 85), and thus needed to be tamed and contained. Emotions specifically ‘may be experienced as the body taking over the self’ (Lupton, 1998, p. 88). With mindfulness techniques, the exact opposite is encouraged: The body which is pursued and constructed in practicing mindfulness meditation is one that is able to manage emotions not in a cognitive, but in a distinctly corporal manner, highlighting bodily sensations as the key to a subjective experience of the self.

The practice of mindfulness is embedded in contemporary discourses that move both the self and its techniques, as well as an increasing reflexivity of emotions to the center of attention (Neckel, 2009). In addition, mindfulness produces narratives of its own; primarily about a lifestyle described as mindful, in which the self, the body, and emotions are of increased importance. Here, mindfulness appears closely linked to a striving for ‘emotional resilience’ (De La Rosa, 2020), ‘self-compassion’ (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011) – all of these being book titles by authors that draw on mindfulness – and appropriate self-care, the latter being especially popular at the moment. This term, like mindfulness itself, is sometimes used vaguely to justify practices and consumption choices intended to benefit ‘well-being’ in a broad sense. In its popular reception, mindfulness is thus connected to a lifestyle concerned with self-care, self-love, and minimalism, which is often equated with the appreciation of everyday things. As a typical example, a German lifestyle blog features ‘13 Ways to More Self-Care in Everyday Life’ (Gallei, 2021) and recommends to readers, in addition to meditation and conscious breathing, that they engage in regular journaling, conscious idleness, the discovery of slowness, or going outdoors no matter the weather. As another example for this kind of discourse, Flow, a German lifestyle magazine, tries to press the ideals of mindfulness into a harmonious, childlike feel-good framework with a particularly playful aesthetic and simple, quotidian themes: ‘Small happiness, daily life and the beauty of not always managing to be perfect [. . .] Flow is all about positive psychology, mindfulness, creativity and the beauty of imperfection’ (Flow, 2021).

This is often accompanied by the glorification of nature, a romanticizing longing for a life characterized as simple and primal, and a rejection of stereotypical symbols of speed, progress, and productivity.

In workshop settings, mindfulness practices themselves are negotiated as a part of daily self-care, mainly in the form of constantly monitoring one’s current subjective condition. During classes, participants are repeatedly encouraged to take note of whether they ‘need’ something, whether they are warm enough, feel the need to open a window, or to have some water (Memo 06). Often, this practice is formulated as an explicit question that ought to be firmly integrated into one’s everyday life: ‘Look at what is right for you right now’ (mindfulness teacher, Memo 06).

While there is some consensus about certain basic needs, addressing them connotes a highly individual task that is approachable only through subjective experience. Both the analyzed documents and workshops thus call on people to constantly observe their personal needs in a mindful and nonjudgmental way, and to satisfy them accordingly. In addition to body-oriented practices, there are writing tasks in which, for example, participants
take note of positive and negative events, describe their emotional experience during them, and record the resulting impulses for action. What these exercises have in common is an explicit engagement with affective experience, which is based above all on bodily sensations but reflected on with a view to the level of emotions. Still, some desires are given a particularly positive connotation, such as the desire for quiet and calm, healthy food, or escaping to the outdoors. Practices that are generally considered unhealthy, such as smoking or consuming fast food, do not generally appear in these discourses, or even are challenged as not being ‘true’ needs (Memo 13). From such, partly implicit, hierarchization emerges the normative ideal of a mindful life, in which individual differences are emphasized, but which ultimately assumes and validates similar needs.

All these concepts of mindful living connect to the currently glorified ideal of ‘slow living,’ which can be interpreted as a response to the accelerated imperatives of neoliberal capitalism in their orientation toward growth and efficiency: ‘To take time, is to take time out of a regular routine dominated by work and characterized by productivity’ (Tam, 2008, p. 214). This is also closely linked to the ideal of ‘doing nothing’ (Stanley et al., 2020) which is gaining more and more social and political significance. In mindfulness discourse, the pace of contemporary life is criticized frequently. As one instructor put it: ‘It’s our zeitgeist to be busy’ (Memo 19). This accelerated, stress-inducing life is often equated with everyday life in the big city. In the workshops, too, we encountered a certain hostility toward the city, which is interpreted symbolically as a noisy and, for the human brain, overwhelming foil to original, more nature-connected human life. One participant feared:

Here [in the big city] we are stressed all the time, just because of the noise. When we leave the house, there are loud cars and we all get sick. So I really think that we are all just sick. (Memo 03)

This concern that persistent stress can be detrimental to long-term health is a central narrative in mindfulness discourses. The intensity of modern everyday life, be it at work or at home, is regarded as fundamentally harmful to human well-being on a physiological level. Respectively, the experience of stress in everyday life is a core motivation for taking up mindfulness lessons, as the popular MBSR courses are specifically designed to address symptoms of stress. These entanglements of mindfulness practices and discourses, which go far beyond meditation and indeed stand for a whole lifestyle, provide an important foundation for a sociological understanding of mindfulness. It is true, then, that mindfulness is intended to solve individual problems generated by social issues such as stress. However, from a sociological perspective, our ethnographic research shows that mindfulness itself reveals paradoxes inherent to the program.

**Paradoxes of mindfulness**

The broad and heterogeneous current reception of mindfulness (Islam et al., 2022) reveals some paradoxes in its practice. They shed light on the conflict-ridden societal processes of emotionalization and therapeuticization in which the popularity of mindfulness is embedded. In the following, we discuss four of the paradoxes that came to light during our
ethnographic research and analyze them in terms of their sociological significance and their potential for an empirically grounded analysis of contemporary societies.

**Paradox A: Optimization narratives and aimlessness.** Sociological critique is often directed against the economic use of mindfulness, and for good reason. In practice, too, we have encountered numerous programs that explicitly emphasize the potential of mindfulness to improve individual performance. However, this use of the program for self-enhancement is inherently contradictory, since its principles aim solely to achieve the state of mindfulness itself. Moreover, even a mindfulness practice that is clearly not focused on optimization usually remains associated with certain hopes that go beyond this pure end in itself. Throughout our fieldwork, we participated in a variety of course formats. Workshops that focused on optimization and performance enhancement through mindfulness differed significantly from those that were oriented towards teaching mindfulness techniques in a more general sense, like MBSR programs. Consequently, we have found opposing narratives that we situate between the poles of optimization and avowed aimlessness.

Numerous offerings, especially in the corporate context, promise that mindfulness leads to an improvement of, for example, performance and resilience. These promises are not limited to economic contexts but can also be found in relation to sports and social interaction. Mindfulness workshops for skill optimization purposes differ from traditional MBSR courses in terms of their participants: In optimization workshops, it is often younger men who attend for professional reasons. Moreover, mindfulness courses that are designed to improve certain skills are sometimes explicitly aimed at executives or athletes. The participants are addressed as personality types that always ‘give everything’ and are ‘full of energy,’ and therefore do not perceive the limits of their resilience (Memo 02). This ambition to ‘live life on the fast lane’ (Memo 19) is regarded as admirable, but problematic, as constant over-exhaustion may eventually lead to burnout, and thus to a complete collapse of individual performance. Mindfulness techniques are promoted as a nearly miraculous way to prevent burnout while simultaneously optimizing personal productivity. The workshops are characterized by a New Work vocabulary and are reminiscent in many ways of motivational courses: Concentration exercises are supposed to help people get into ‘flow,’ compose personal ‘vision statements,’ and, with the help of augmented attention, work in a more ‘solution-oriented’ way. Mindfulness can, it is supposed, be ‘trained like a muscle’ (Memo 18). In addition to classic, usually very short meditation sessions, there is also a practice of ‘stress inoculations’ in which, for example, participants briefly move their arms to the point of exhaustion in order to imitate physical stress reactions and increase their resilience through such training. Exercises often involve cheering each other on and celebrating each other, for example by clapping or targeted affirmative shouting such as ‘YES! YES! YES!’ intended to evoke emotions labeled as ‘positive’ (Memo 19). One teacher repeatedly compared meditation practice to going to the gym and kissed his biceps – half-jokingly – when speaking of how worthwhile a regular ‘workout’ is (Memo 19).

On the other hand, in numerous mindfulness workshops, especially in classical MBSR courses, such optimization tendencies are evaluated very critically. Mindfulness is then conveyed as an end in itself: ‘The goal is to be mindful. The goal is to be more aware of
what is happening’ (mindfulness teacher). However, most participants still attend these courses for a specific reason. They typically hope to find relief from a suffering, such as stress or chronic pain (see earlier). Thus, although many of the mindfulness practitioners dislike social pressure to self-optimize and are critical of performance-oriented mindfulness programs, the programs’ paradox between aimlessness and goal-directed use remains. In practice, this contradiction is often resolved by declaring any positive effects of mindfulness to be side effects of the program. Nonetheless, this paradox is a recurring concomitant of the overreliance on mindfulness as a technique for solving problems, which will be discussed in more detail as part of the next paradox.

**Paradox B: Standardized solutions for individual problems.** Although mindfulness practice and discourses emphasize the subjectivity and individuality of feelings, bodies, and problems, the responses of mindfulness programs to these issues are strikingly standardized. At the same time, mindfulness is experienced as effective, which is also related to the fact that the problems experienced as subjective are by no means purely individual but can be seen as collective sufferings.

Participants report a lack of self-love and self-care as well as a longing to ‘finally come first again’ (Memo 07): ‘I need support here so that I don’t lose myself’ (Interview 04). These needs are addressed in mindfulness programs with buzzwords such as ‘self-kindness’ and ‘self-compassion.’ Participants are driven by everyday problems in their lives or a ‘certain degree of mental suffering [and] they all hope to feel less pressure. Just to be able to breathe more freely’ (Interview 05). Asked why they took part in the program, participants cited, in addition to a general sense of stress, personal crises and biographical turning points. Breakups, losses, promotions, new pressures at work, and a sense of being overwhelmed during what has been referred to as the rush hour of life are typical responses to the question about participant motivation. The problems are characterized and legitimated repeatedly as such by the same metaphors, using images like the incessant thought carousel and the daily hamster wheel (Memo 02). Equivalently, the biographical narratives of teachers and icons of mindfulness often resonate with the promise of a fundamental life shift toward greater contentment and happiness. One instructor told the class about his career as a young engineer in the tech industry, where ‘120-hour weeks were not uncommon’ (Memo 11). Although he had ‘everything’ in his early thirties – money, a house, professional success – he became sick and unhappy and only found his way back to life satisfaction thanks to mindfulness practice. Consequently, he even quit his job and became a mindfulness teacher himself. From this point on, life is divided into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ (Memo 11).

In this way mindfulness is often brokered as a simple solution to complex and seemingly individual problems. In an equally simplifying way, these problems are frequently presented schematically, as with the equation ‘suffering = pain x resistance’ (Memo 18). A guide to mindfulness meditation in the New York Times is prefaced as follows: ‘Meditation is a simple practice available to all, which can reduce stress, increase calmness and clarity and promote happiness. Learning how to meditate is straightforward, and the benefits can come quickly’ (Gelles, 2021). The simplification of solutions has been discussed in the last decade, above all with regard to technological problem-solving, under the term solutionism (Morozov, 2013; Nachtwey & Seidl, 2020). This ideology puts
the solution before the problem. It involves the assumption that for every social issue there is a technological solution, ideally embodied by the ‘California mindset’ (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2020). The popularity of mindfulness programs in Silicon Valley thus seems only logical, since they provide a broad repertoire of low-threshold techniques that are easy to integrate into daily life and promise extensive effects. A mindfulness guidebook written by and for Google employees states: ‘after a few months, you find your quality of life changing dramatically. You have more energy, you suffer fewer sick days, you can get more stuff done, and you look better in the mirror. You feel great about yourself’ (Tan, 2014, p. 65).

The standardized mindfulness techniques are supposed to help everyone across the board, although it is always conveyed that each participant should find their own way of dealing with their unique suffering. This heavy emphasis on the individuality of problems and the promise of their solution is in contradiction with the solutionist and simplistic logic of the promises of mindfulness.

**Paradox C: Neuroscientific foundation and anti-cognitive knowledge of the body.** The teaching of mindfulness is located in the epistemological tension between highly complex, neuroscience-based knowledge about the body and brain and a deeply subjective, emotional, and anti-cognitive knowledge of the body. The latter is revealed especially in the practice, the embodied affective exercise of mindfulness, which is supposed to be disengaged from language and cognition. Accordingly, mindful experiences are not accessible via pure cognition, for they have ‘their own compelling logic, their own empirical validity, their own wisdom which can be known only from the inside’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. xxviii).

However, the theory emphasizing (neuro-)scientific findings serves to scientifically legitimate and add value to subjective affective experience. At the core of this is the neuroplasticity of the brain, which can be changed and therefore optimized. Any doubts about the program are met with reference to supposed scientific certainty: Reference is often made to highly complex studies (usually involving MRI) demonstrating that mindfulness meditation changes the brain. Brain functioning is itself a central topic in the courses. The role of the amygdala, hypothalamus, limbic system and prefrontal cortex, as well as the autonomic nervous system, divided into sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems for the development of stress, are explained in every mindfulness workshop. Mindfulness thus profits, following Ehrenberg (2020), from the ‘moral authority’ (p. 45) of cognitive neuroscience, which sustains ‘those collective beliefs upon which the highest value is bestowed, with the unequalled demonstrative resources of science’ (p. 45). An anecdote illustrating this paradoxical entanglement of subjective and supposedly objective knowledge of the body was shared by a mindfulness teacher during a weekend retreat: ‘therein lies the special strength of meditation: You don’t have to like it, but it works anyway’ (Memo 12). She thus advises skeptics to just try it out for a while and let themselves be convinced. After even a brief period of regular meditation practice, neuroscientific methods could, she supposed, detect changes in the brain resulting solely from the ongoing practice of meditation, not from reflecting or understanding. When the brain is made the central reference object and actor in the theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness practice, its application appears legitimate even in secular contexts. For some participants, it is precisely this neuroscientific
evidence that constitutes the compelling argument for practicing meditation, while they are dismissive of spiritual and esoteric applications.

At the same time, programs like MBSR remain open to spiritual connections. Moreover, scientific evidence is often couched in figurative and highly metaphoric language. For instance, the brain is sometimes equated with a ‘snow globe’ (Memo 18) where thoughts in an unmindful state buzz around chaotically and require calm in order to settle. This fuzzy and at times seemingly esoteric language, which also includes some of the basic imperatives of mindfulness (such as being with oneself, sensing oneself, or being anchored in the here and now), stands in contrast to the neuroscientific contexts of justification.

Through the combination of both strands of justification, mindfulness immunizes itself against all criticism: Its efficacy is scientifically grounded and physically palpable in equal measure. According to the recurring argumentation in the workshops we attended, anyone who does not feel the effect has simply not yet experienced mindfulness properly (Memo 02). Thus, in every mindfulness workshop the supposedly factual framework of science faces off with the deeply subjective knowledge of the body with its referenced individuality and nonobjectifiability. It is precisely this paradoxical entanglement of the two epistemologies that largely shields mindfulness programs from substantive criticism and makes them so attractive to a wide range of social groups.

**Paradox D: Glorification of authenticity and manipulation of emotions.** Another paradox is found in the simultaneous glorification of an authentic self that can only be felt in an affective bodily way without emotional labeling and the teaching of explicit emotion programs for the purposeful governance of feelings, such as emotional intelligence.

The discourses and practice of mindfulness are often about seeking access to a true or authentic self. This is already evident in the basic imperative of mindfulness of ‘tuning into the basic experiences of living’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 6). The teaching can thus hardly make do without references to authenticity. In mindfulness practice, this striving is expressed above all in the constant reference to a knowledge of the body that is supposedly prereflective, and constructed as particularly authentic. For this reason, exercises for conscious body awareness are among the central practices of popular mindfulness programs. These techniques involve feeling into the body and perceiving its sensations in a nonjudgmental way. Practitioners are to distance themselves from thoughts and emotions, merely register them attentively, and not identify with them. This is reflected, for example, in the phrase ‘You are not your thoughts,’ which is popular in mindfulness contexts (e.g., Trussell, 2018) or, as we were told in one of the courses we attended, ‘You are not your emotions’ (Mindfulness Brochure). Typical of such practices is the body scan, which involves consciously feeling individual parts of the body. The intention is explicitly to avoid thinking about the particular body parts; rather, the aim is to overcome cognitive knowledge about the body. Underlying this imperative is a critique of the typical modern Western separation of body and mind and the concomitant loss of an essential core perceived as whole. The ontological assumption prevails of a pre-social, authentic self which, though it is obscured by deposits of external influences such as upbringing and environment, remains potentially accessible. During socialization and the individual’s everyday living, this self disappears under ‘layers’ of the complex reality of modern life:
At some point we don’t even know anymore, like ok who am I really, where am I even at, and what’s good for my body, because first there are these layers that we get to sort of shovel away a bit in order to somehow get to the core. (Mindfulness teacher)

It is a truism, even in the context of MBSR courses and meditation workshops, that thoughts drift off during exercise such that even experienced practitioners think rather than just feel. Nevertheless, regular practice is said to lead in the medium and long term to being more ‘in one’s body’ and thus ‘with oneself’ (Mindfulness Brochure). Hence, mindfulness is constructed ‘as sui generis’ (Arat, 2017, p. 173): ‘mindfulness practice therefore constitutes a negative heuristic of stripping away barriers of mental thought to instigate an embodied sense of self-realization’ (Arat, 2017, p. 173).

Despite the focus on supposed authenticity, in many mindfulness courses training methods aimed at dealing with emotions also play a central role. For example, in the form of communication exercises or reflective examination of one’s values. In many of the courses we attended, recommended reading included the classic Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman (1995), an emotion program that exemplifies the directed self-management of feelings (Neckel, 2009). Aside from mindfulness, emotional intelligence is the central skill for coping with the ‘challenges and stresses of today,’ according to a teacher in one of the workshops we attended: ‘Knowing how to read emotions is essentially a superpower’ (Memo 19). Yet this very concept has been sharply criticized by sociologists, and not only because of its lack of theoretical and empirical foundation (Burkitt, 2012; Neckel, 2009). Its unreflected and untenable application in the field of management has also resulted in the frequent use of emotional intelligence (‘EI’) and its correlated ‘emotional quotient E.Q.’ as empty buzzwords. Mindfulness workshops referring to ‘EI’ are then no longer just about the teaching of mindfulness per se but often also concerned with the acquisition of socially desirable personality traits and culturally preferable values, which are targeted with techniques of emotional manipulation (Neckel, 2009, p. 191). Mindfulness practice also teaches other, similar concepts besides ‘EI’ that promise the ability to acquire emotional competencies through emotional reflexivity and mental training. Moreover, even basic mindfulness exercises for distancing oneself from reflexively available emotions in favor of a supposedly more authentic body sensibility are ultimately an attempt to consciously control feelings. Mindfulness is then often equated in a completely undifferentiated way with emotional competence and empathic skills, which again promise optimization.

It is therefore not uncommon for a workshop to convey at once both the ideal of a supposedly pre-social and pre-reflexive body with its pure sensibility as well as the purposeful application of emotional reflexivity for the sake of social or economic ends. This paradox shows once again that current mindfulness programs contain far-reaching promises that are systematically mutually exclusive.

**Mindfulness as contemporary phenomenon: A specious promise to solve any problem**

Mindfulness in its current reception, decoupled from its religious origin, proves to be a specious promise because it can never be realized in its entirety. Our ethnographic field
research has shown how mindfulness is applied in such diverse and heterogeneous fields that its paradoxical manifestations are an inevitable consequence of those conflicting applications. However, this contradictory nature does not seem to have led to a decline in the program’s popularity or to doubts about its credibility. On the contrary, with its tension-filled narratives and practices, the program makes itself unassailable and always offers precisely the answer that is sought. How can this work and what does that say about our contemporary emotion culture?

The four paradoxes illustrate empirically that current forms of mindfulness practice hold out the prospect of something that, from a purely systematic perspective, they cannot fulfill: a comprehensive transformation of individual lives and collective togetherness by practicing technologies of the self. To be sure, mindfulness can certainly alleviate symptoms and reduce subjective feelings of stress. However, as an explicitly secular and scientifically based program, it cannot authentically make a broad, quasi-metaphysical promise of salvation (Arat, 2017). Yet this is precisely what is implied when, for example, the turn to mindfulness is glorified as the ultimate biographical turning point, is held up as a blanket panacea for all problems, or reference is made to the ineffable experiences of meditation practice, which can only be experienced in one’s own body and with consistent training. This inherent contradiction is equally evident in the practice of mindfulness, where claims to ultimate validity, pre-reflexivity, and universality combine in a paradoxical but powerful way with scientficity, individuality, and striving for optimization.

Following Islam et al. (2022), who refer to mindfulness in an organizational context as an ‘empty signifier,’ the program can be compared to a reversible figure: These optical illusions, which simultaneously show two motifs – both a duck’s head and a rabbit’s head, or an old woman and a young woman at the same time – allow the viewer to see what they are looking for. At the same time, the viewing persons always have the possibility to direct their perception to the other motif. This is similar to mindfulness. Depending on who wants to use it for what, they will find exactly what is promised, be it optimized performance or concentration ability, stress reduction, or the overcoming of individual and collective suffering. In order to present a blanket solution to social problems, mindfulness must be paradoxical, since the social circumstances in which it becomes fruitful are as well. Any criticism of one aspect of the program can be dismissed with reference to an opposite one. And thus it is that mindfulness becomes unassailable; all criticism bounces off it because it is always many things at once.

The paradoxical nature of contemporary mindfulness practice in no way weakens its popularity, but rather fosters it. Contemporary mindfulness is built on the pledge of individual and emotional change. Practicing it promises to always be a solution, regardless of whether the problem to be solved is of a personal, social, or political nature. This solutionist logic ideally complements the program’s neuroscientific contexts of justification. Similarly to how solutionism (Morozov, 2013) is characterized by a fundamental attitude of optimism, the implications of neuroplasticity also carry a wondrous promise (Ehrenberg, 2020, p. 235). However, just as the extensive belief in neuroplasticity, the promises of mindfulness are deceptive in this regard: they raise the hope that changes in the brain might have miraculous effects on the whole subject. Stanley and Kortelainen (2019) rightly criticize this by elaborating on how the universalizing rhetoric of mindfulness seems to explain much of its appeal.
Focusing exclusively on the here and now and the simplistic glorification of the small, everyday things are undoubtedly useful strategies for overcoming personal challenges, at least temporarily. They also help to distance oneself from overwhelming social and political problems over which the individual has little control. Moreover, the program’s idealization of authenticity can be interpreted as an expression of a desire for a less complex society. The same applies to the idea that one can simply remove the problematic influences of society and culture on the body and access an authentic, pre-social body that is merely hidden under ‘layers’ of sociality. The desire to be ‘in one’s body’ and to perceive the world through it – and only through the body – can thus be understood as a social strategy for considering collective crises as something one can escape from. The glorification of such simplistic, yet specious solutions to all emotional and affective problems might therefore, more than anything else, indicate the urgency with which people strive for a way out of emotional crises and exhaustion. Thus, the popularity of mindfulness programs rather suggests inferences about social problems and widespread emotional suffering than representing a genuine, socially sustainable solution to it.

Acknowledgements

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Grant SFB 1171 – 258523721.

Note

1. We refer to our ethnographic material as ‘memos.’ In the text, we identify direct quotations from our self-recorded data by providing numbers for the respective memo, e.g. ‘Memo 18.’ Direct quotes from interviews are provided with the information about the role of the person quoted, e.g., ‘mindfulness teacher.’

References

Arat, A. (2017). ‘What it means to be truly human’: The postsecular hack of mindfulness. Social Compass, 64(2), 167–179. https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686177697390
Berli, O. (2021). ‘Maybe this is speculative now’: Negotiating and valuing interpretations in qualitative research. Human Studies, 44, 765–790. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-021-09594-3
Boltanski, L., & Esquerre, A. (2020). Enrichment: A critique of commodities. Polity Press.
Burkitt, I. (2012). Emotional reflexivity: Feeling, emotion and imagination in reflexive dialogues. Sociology, 46(3), 458–472. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511422587
Carrette, J., & King, R. (2004). Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion. Routledge.
Carvalho, A. (2021). Rethinking the politics of meditation: Practice, affect and ontology. The Sociological Review, 96(6), 1260–1276. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211029457
Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2015). The wellness syndrome. Polity Press.
Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Sage.
Crossley, N. (2006). *Reflexive embodiment in contemporary society: The body in late modern society*. Open University Press.

De La Rosa, R. (2020). *Don’t tell me to relax: Emotional resilience in the age of rage, feels and freak-outs*. Shambhala Publications.

Einstein, M. (2007). *Brands of faith: Marketing religion in a commercial age*. Routledge.

Ehrenberg, A. (2016). *The weariness of the self: Diagnosing the history of depression in the contemporary age*. McGill-Queen’s University Press (Original work published 1998).

Ehrenberg, A. (2020). *The mechanics of passion: Brain, behaviour, and society*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Flow (2021). *About Flow*. Flow Magazine. www.flowmagazine.com/flow

Forbes, D. (2019). *Mindfulness and its discontents: Education, self, and social transformation*. Fernwood Publishing.

Foucault, M. (1986). *The care of the self: The history of sexuality 3*. Pantheon Books.

Gallei, S. (2021, March 17). *13 Wege zu mehr Self-Care im Alltag oder wie wir es schaffen können, in diesen Zeiten nicht verrückt zu werden [13 ways to more self-care in everyday life, or how we can manage to not go crazy during these times]*. Little Years. www.litleyears.de/blog/13-wege-zu-mehr-self-care-im-alltag-oder-wie-wir-es-schaffen-in-diesen-zeitennicht-verruueckt-zu-werden/

Gelles, D. (2021). *How to meditate*. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-meditate

Germer, C. K. (2009). *The mindful path to self-compassion: Freeing yourself from destructive thoughts and emotions*. The Guildford Press.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Han, B.-C. (2015). *The burnout society*. Stanford University Press.

Hickey, W. S. (2010). Meditation as medicine: A critique. *CrossCurrents*, 60(2), 168–184. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2010.00118.x

Hyland, T. (2017). *McDonaldizing spirituality: Mindfulness, education, and consumerism*. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 15(4), 334–356. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344617696972

Ikea (2021). *Finding mindful moments in a busy schedule*. IKEA Ideas. www.ikea.com/us/en/ideas/finding-mindful-moments-in-a-busy-schedule-pub913d30c0

Illouz, E. (2008). *Saving the modern soul: Therapy, emotions and the culture of self-help*. University of California Press.

Irizarry, J. A. (2015). Putting a price on Zen: The business of redefining religion for global consumption. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 16, 51–69. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1305896

Islam, G., Holm, M., & Karjalainen, M. (2022). Sign of the times: Workplace mindfulness as an empty signifier. *Organization*, 29(1), 3–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417740643

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation for everyday life*. Piatkus.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. Bantam Books.

Kucinskas, J. (2019). *The mindful elite: Mobilizing change from the inside out*. Oxford University Press.

Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. W. W. Norton & Co.

Lupton, D. (1998). *The emotional self: A sociocultural exploration*. Sage.

Morozov, E. (2013). To save everything, click here: Technology, solutionism and the urge to fix problems that don’t exist. *PublicAffairs*.

Nachtwey, O., & Seidl, T. (2020). The solutionist ethic and the spirit of digital capitalism [Preprint]. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/sgjzq

Neckel, S. (2009). Emotion by design: Self-management of feelings as a cultural program. In B. Röttger-Rössler & H. J. Markowitsch (Eds.), *Emotions as bio-cultural processes* (pp. 181–198). Springer.
Neckel, S., Schaffner, A. K., & Wagner, G. (2017). *Burnout, fatigue, exhaustion: An interdisciplinary perspective on a modern affliction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. William Morrow.

Nike (2018, March 1). *Nike Headspace partnership mindfulness training*. NIKE news. https://news.nike.com/news/nike-headspace-partnership

Pagis, M. (2010). From abstract concepts to experiential knowledge: Embodying enlightenment in a meditation center. *Qualitative Sociology, 33*, 469–489. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-010-9169-6

Pagis, M. (2019). The sociology of meditation. In M. Farias, D. Brazier, & M. Lalljee (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of meditation* (pp. 571–589). Oxford University Press.

Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality*. Repeater Books.

Purser, R., & Loy, D. (2013, July 1). *Beyond McMindfulness*. The Huffington Post. www.huffpost.com/entry/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289

Rieff, P. (1966). *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. Harper & Row.

Rose, N. (1990). *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self*. Routledge.

Salmenniemi, S. (2017). ‘We can’t live without beliefs’: Self and society in therapeutic engagements. *The Sociological Review, 65*(4), 611–627. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026116677194

Sauerborn, E. (forthcoming). The politicization of secular mindfulness – Extinction Rebellion’s emotive protest practices. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*.

Schaffner, A. (2021). *The art of self-improvement: Ten timeless truths*. Yale University Press.

Sennett, R. (2017). *The fall of public man*. W. W. Norton & Co. [Original work published 1977].

Stanley, S. (2012). Mindfulness: Towards a critical perspective. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 6*(9), 631–641. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00454.x

Stanley, S., & Kortelainen, I. (2019). Assembling mindful bodies: Mindfulness as a universal ‘laboratory of practice’. In S. Salmenniemi, J. Nurmi, I. Perheentupa, & H. Bergroth (Eds.), *Assembling therapeutics: Cultures, politics and materiality* (pp. 20–42). Routledge.

Stanley, S., Smith, R. J., Ford, E., & Jones, J. (2020). Making something out of nothing: Breaching everyday life by standing still in a public space. *The Sociological Review, 68*(6), 1250–1272. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120940616

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.

Tam, D. (2008). Slow journeys: What does it mean to go slow? *Food, Culture and Society, 11*(2), 207–218. https://doi.org/10.2752/175174408X317570

Tan, C.-M. (2014). *Search inside yourself: The unexpected path to achieving success, happiness (and world peace)*. HarperCollins.

Trussell, F. (2018). *You are not your thoughts: The secret magic of mindfulness*. O-Books.

Wacquant, L. (2004). *Body & soul: Notebooks of an apprentice boxer*. Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2015). For a sociology of flesh and blood. *Qualitative Sociology, 38*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-014-9291-y

Walsh, Z. (2016). A meta-critique of mindfulness critiques: From McMindfulness to critical mindfulness. In R. E. Purser, D. Forbes, & A. Burke (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness: Culture, context, and social engagement* (pp. 153–166). Springer VS.

Ward, L. (2015). Caring for ourselves? Self-care and neoliberalism. In M. Barnes, T. Brannelly, L. Ward, & N. Ward (Eds.), *Ethics of care: Critical advances in international perspective* (pp. 45–56). Policy Press.

Wilson, J. (2014). *Mindful America*. Oxford University Press.

Wright, K. (2008). Theorizing therapeutic culture: Past influences, future directions. *Journal of Sociology, 44*(4), 321–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783308097124