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The international migration of mindfulness: A plea for contemplative pauses in sport and exercise psychology

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Abstract

Objectives: Research on international migration has flourished in recent years, but the global movement of ideas, practices, and cultural norms, especially within the sport and exercise psychology community, has received scant attention. We examined the international migration of mindfulness to understand how the concept has been culturally adapted to fit mainstream sport and exercise psychology research and practice.

Method: Sport-based mindfulness interventions, journal articles in Psychology of Sport and Exercise from 2008–2020, and sessions of the FEPSAC 2019 Congress were examined to reflect on the current positionality of mindfulness within sport and exercise psychology research and practice.

Results: In its journey from East to West, mindfulness has been reappropriated through the mechanisms of mediating, mystifying, medicalizing, mainstreaming, marketing, and moralizing. The reviewed publications approached mindfulness as a means to enhance athletes' performance, well-being, or both. Spiritual and Eastern philosophical roots of mindfulness were notably absent from the majority of publications.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Western cultural perspective has dominated the cultural encounter when mindfulness migrated from East to West. Researchers and practitioners are called to reflect on their own positionality and how Eurocentric assumptions permeate contemporary mindfulness practice. We call for greater attention to the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of mindfulness and for culturally competent and sensitive practice.

Keywords: Philosophical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions

Introduction

The idea of transnationalism has increasingly been employed to analyze and study the emerging patterns of cultural exchange within the realm of sports. While scholars in sport psychology working within a transnational framework have examined various aspects of mobility and diverse participants, the focus has predominantly been on individual athletes and their experiences 'on the move'. However, transnationalism extends beyond the movements of people and encompasses all activities occurring across national borders, including the exchange of ideas, technologies, and material connections. This highlights a gap in knowledge, as transnational flows relevant to sport and exercise psychology also involve diverse sets of practices, concepts, and ideas. One such concept, which has migrated, transformed, and become mainstreamed in contemporary sport psychology research and practice, is mindfulness. In this narrative review, our objective is to explore the appropriation of ideas and practices within the transnational sporting sphere, focusing on the cultural evolution of mindfulness—an immensely popular concept in contemporary sport and exercise psychology. By examining the transformation of mindfulness from a spiritual practice to a technique for enhancing performance and well-being, we aim to demonstrate that research and practice in sport and exercise psychology are not value-neutral endeavors. Rather, they are subject to power struggles and aligned with the interests of certain privileged groups involved in the transnational processes of social and cultural change. The structure of the paper is as follows: we begin by examining the evolving field of transnational studies, followed by an exploration of transnational sporting spaces. We then delve into the concept of mindfulness, analyzing the processes by which it has been adapted to align with mainstream discourse in sport and exercise psychology.

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Finally, we conclude with reflections, recommendations, and a word of caution for scholars and practitioners utilizing mindfulness in their research and/or practice.

The evolving field of transnational studies

Transnational studies emerged as a distinct field in the 1990s when scholars began to emphasize the importance of theorizing the frequent movements across borders that had become a significant aspect of life for an increasing number of individuals. The term 'transnationalism' has gained traction in conceptualizing a type of migration that extends beyond the connection between homeland and hostland, existing within the realm of cultural hybridity and global mobility. For these migrants, their practices, meanings, and affiliations may be connected to multiple geographical origins, and their sense of identity may be more strongly tied to acquired identities, such as professional or leisure-based identities, rather than their countries of origin. For instance, in study involving 15 transnational athletes, many of them underwent multiple cultural relocations, developed a sense of belonging across borders, and felt 'at home' in multiple locations, relying on transnational networks emphasized that transnationalism has many 'aspects' and has been studied through different (although partly overlapping) conceptual frameworks, which he summarized as six 'perspectives' on transnationalism. Briefly, (a) the 'social morphology' perspective focuses on transnational communities, diasporas, and various types of social, political, and cultural networks, (b) 'a type of consciousness' refers to a subjectivity characterized by multiple sets of identifications, (c) 'a mode of cultural reproduction' is concerned with hybrid forms of cultural translation and the reconstruction of everyday practices and styles, (d) the 'avenue of capital' perspective focuses on transnational corporations and economic systems, (e) 'a site of political engagement' focuses on types of activism and political activity facilitated by transnational communication networks, and (f) the '(re)construction of "place" or locality' is concerned with the transformation of living spaces as well as the creation of new 'translocal places' through electronic mediation. In this article, we approach mindfulness through the third lens, in which mindfulness is considered a mode of cultural reproduction. How mindfulness has been integrated into the discourse of sport and exercise psychology is indeed a hybrid combination of diverse and sometimes contradictory ideologies and bodies of knowledge, including Eastern spiritualities, religious practices, Western (Often positivist) science, Western (Especially humanist and positive) psychology, self-help, performance enhancement, human resource management, medicalization, and neoliberalism. When different bodies of knowledge intersect (And sometimes clash), power and privilege struggles often arise. For example, observed that in transcultural encounters, Western notions of religion have frequently been imposed onto non-Western faiths, including the tendency to view religion as simply another aspect of life (A phenomenon evidenced, for instance, in research on cultural identities). The Western conceptualization of religion as a system inherently involving a deity (Due to the historical dominance of monotheistic religions) has likely contributed to the perception of Hinduism and Buddhism more as life philosophies, and subsequently, the separation of mindfulness as a completely secular activity devoid of religious or spiritual content.

Transnational sporting space: contested ideas and

practices

Before delving into specifics of contemporary mindfulness discourse in sport and exercise psychology, it is important to contextualize the phenomenon within broader developments and negotiations in transnational sporting spaces. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, Western scholars discussed the growing interest in Eastern movement cultures within the Western, typically American, context. They observed how the 'new' versions of martial arts (Such as karate, taekwondo, and aikido) and other physical cultures (Like yoga) had diverged significantly from their Eastern origins. While some scholars saw the introduction of Eastern movement cultures as enriching Western physical culture practices, others were critical. For instance, argued that certain American karate schools had deviated so far from the original practice that calling them karate was inaccurate. They noted the absence of spirituality, ethics, rituals, and disciplined practice in these Westernized versions expressed concerns that martial arts had shifted from being arts to sports, losing their essence as practices that impart fundamental lessons about human existence and instead focusing solely on competition, aligned with the Western model of modern sport.

As Eastern martial arts gained popularity, debates arose regarding their inclusion as Olympic sports. While inclusion could signify recognition and a departure from the Olympic colonialist project that ignored non-Western sports, it also raised concerns about Westernizing these physical cultures to fit a narrow elite sport model. The interest in Eastern philosophical ideas, particularly Zen, also grew within mainstream Western sports and sport psychology from the 1970s onward. Texts like Gallwey's "Inner Game of Tennis" (1974) and Orlick's "In Pursuit of Excellence" (1980) applied Zen principles to Western sports, emphasizing peak performance. However, discussions largely psychologized Zen and neglected its spiritual and ethical dimensions.

The migration of Eastern philosophies and practices to the Western sport context involved reframing them as secular, psychological, and commercial, rather than philosophical, ideological, or ethical. This process of transformation also occurred in Western-originated physical cultures like parkour, breakdancing, and mountain biking, as they became mainstreamed through sportification processes involving competition, standardization, and commercialization. While these developments have created more employment opportunities in sport psychology, they have also necessitated adaptations to incorporate practices like mindfulness into the mainstream discourse.

Mindfulness: the journey from East to West

Mindfulness originated in the traditional Eastern philosophy of Hinduism in Ancient India where it has been practised for millennia as an essential component of spiritual and religious training that is cultivated through disciplined guidance and practice to understand the true D. Roychowdhury *et al.* Psychology of Sport & Exercise 56 (2021) 101958 3 nature of reality, being and/or consciousness, and the relationship between the two, among other truths. It is evident from archival records that various methods of disciplined introspective and meditative practices were common custom for the different schools of Indian philosophy, taught in the form of recitations, and orally transferred in an unbroken line of transmission (i.e., Sruti or Sanskrit: श्रुति) across generations (in press). These practices are now believed to have been around for thousands of years (Andersen & Waterson, 2017) before they were formally compiled and

documented in the Vedic scriptures. Documented evidence of some of these meditative practices in Vedic texts may be found in Rigveda (Sanskrit: ऋग्वेद), which is one of the four sacred canonical Vedic texts of Hinduism, from approximately around 3000 - 2500 BCE. It should also be noted that the beginning of mindfulness is often misattributed to Buddhism. It is understood that Prince Siddhartha, influenced by Vedic teachings at the time, integrated elements of meditative practices into his Noble Truths (in press). Some of the first recorded instructions on mindful practices in Buddhism appear in the texts of Satipatthana Sutta² around 20 BCE. Our understanding of mindfulness is grounded within the Eastern contemplative philosophy from where it originates and which underscores a disciplined and reflective practice to seek out truths about the self, existence, and reality, and not in the contemporary Western version of mindfulness that we shall examine now. In the West, mindfulness has broadly been characterized as the capacity to pay attention to a given purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. Some Western scholars define mindfulness as “a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience” while others highlight the distinction between mindfulness practice (i.e., methods that foster mindfulness) and dispositional mindfulness (i.e., tendency to be mindful in everyday life). It should be noted that the Western discovery of Vedic practices may be traced back to early 16th century when missionaries, intellectuals, and enthusiasts, who once lumped Vedic and Buddhist texts as “Oriental Philosophy”, decided to adapt and extol those practices as scientific, rational, and naturalistic (See Lopez, 2008, 2012). Interest in contemporary mindfulness, particularly in the West, has skyrocketed in the past two decades, by virtue of its salutary clinical outcomes and as a result of increased public discourse and acceptance. The mindfulness movement, pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, has transformed the set of beliefs, practices, and traditions prevalent in Asia into a psychological technique and strategy that may be utilized to alleviate mental suffering and promote well-being. The therapeutic efficaciousness of mindfulness has yielded new interpretations and legitimacy for traditional Vedic practices which coupled with its scientific validation has elevated its profile to become the gold standard for psychotherapy.

Adoption of mindfulness in Western culture

The integration of mindfulness research and practice in the field of sport and exercise psychology prompts us to examine the various paths it has taken from East to West, from spiritual to secular, from traditional to modern, from religion to psychology, and to its eventual assimilation into sports. However, this process is undoubtedly multifaceted and dynamic rather than linear or confined to specific territories, characterized by fluidity and hybridity. To understand how mindfulness gained widespread acceptance in North America, identified key mechanisms such as mediating, mystifying, medicalizing, mainstreaming, marketing, and moralizing. Wilson suggests that the rapid proliferation of mindfulness-branded products and services illustrates how Eastern practices have been adapted to and embraced by a new host culture that has attributed practical or worldly benefits to it contends that Westerners, particularly those in the mid-19th century dissatisfied with their current state, became increasingly intrigued by Eastern concepts and acted as intermediaries to reinterpret and apply mindfulness to their American lifestyle. Similarly, by bringing mindfulness from

the East, mystified and pioneered a meditative approach that could be readily applied worldwide. The surge in meta-analyses and systematic reviews aimed at providing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in treating various physical and mental health conditions further contributed to the medicalization of mindfulness. Expanding on this, mindfulness was subsequently mainstreamed by shifting its focus from a transcendent pursuit of spiritual enlightenment to positioning it as a solution for numerous life concerns, including mindful weight loss, mindful parenting, mindful eating, mindful teaching, and mindful sex, among others. This not only validated mindfulness as a universal remedy but also facilitated its commercialization into a highly profitable industry, with an estimated annual revenue growth of 11.4% and expected to double in the next two years, reaching a market value of US \$1.2 Billion. Finally, moralizing mindfulness is evident in the prioritization of the present moment and personal happiness, diverging from the Vedic emphasis on future attainment of better rebirth or nirvana. While this discussion focuses primarily on the Western appropriation of mindfulness in North America, a similar trend can be observed in Europe regarding the decontextualization and commodification of mindfulness in the wellness marketplace.

Awareness in sport and exercise psychology

However, some scholars have acknowledged that according to Eastern philosophical roots, the primary goal of mindfulness-based meditative practices may be perceived as the attainment of insight/enlightenment. Nevertheless, many researchers in sport psychology have shifted away from this perspective to prioritize individuals' functional connections to their environment. This form of mindfulness is appealing due to its dissociation from any belief system, making it attractive to a broad spectrum of users in increasingly secular Western societies. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that most sport-based mindfulness interventions have extracted principles from their philosophical context and applied them in a 'scientific manner' to enhance sport performance and general well-being.

Of particular interest in this narrative review is the reintroduction of mindfulness to the East through the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Insight-Commitment program (MAIC), designed as a culturally sensitive mindfulness and acceptance-based training program for Chinese athletes. As an adaptation of the MAC, it incorporated elements relevant to indigenous Chinese culture, such as acceptance-based coping with adversity, social-oriented values, and insight Mindfulness in the MAIC is defined as "an authentic understanding of one's dynamic physical and mental condition as well as living in the present moment". This definition reflects an adapted appropriation of mindfulness from contemporary Western perspectives and is not entirely consistent with how mindfulness is traditionally understood in Eastern contemplative philosophy.

Moreover, despite acknowledging the influence of Zen Buddhism, key elements of mindfulness training derived from Vedic practices and Buddhist philosophy, such as no-self, non-attachment, and letting go, are absent from the MAIC. Instead of fostering introspective approaches to strengthen individuals' inner psychological and spiritual constitution, insight has been utilized to 'synchronize' social- and individual-oriented values to align with the Whole-Nation sport system in China, further indicating the use of

mindfulness training to serve nationalistic and neoliberal agendas rather than individuals' pursuit of understanding the true nature of being, self, and reality.

Additionally, we conducted a narrative review of journal articles from the *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (PSE) - the official journal of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) - from the years 2008–2020. We also examined the Congress proceedings from the 15th European Congress of Sport and Exercise Psychology organized by FEPSAC in 2019, which brought together 843 participants from 66 nations. Our decision to review outputs from these sources was based on the participation of the authors in the FEPSAC Congress, which produced contributions from a diverse range of Euro-American presenters, and their familiarity with PSE as the official publication of the same organization.

Discussion and conclusions

From the perspective of cultural transition, it might be tempting to conclude that mindfulness has undergone a successful transition. Thinking through the psychological mechanisms from the cultural transition model it is possible to conclude that (a) mindfulness has been transformed into a highly popular and successful concept in sport and exercise psychology discourses (social repositioning), (b) its practices have been secularized to fit the sport psychology professional practice (negotiation of cultural practices), and (c) it has been appropriated as a technique to be used for enhancement of performance and well-being (meaning reconstruction). Another indication of the success of mindfulness in the West is its well-documented clinical and psychotherapeutic efficacy, which cannot be undermined. These successes notwithstanding, in this paper we also want to draw attention to the less 'successful' elements of the transnational migration of mindfulness, which include losing its spiritual, ethical, and philosophical foundations. Although there are already several critiques of the Western conceptions of mindfulness (e.g., exploring the transformation of mindfulness through the lens of transnationalism and the cultural transition can provide an added understanding of the processes of negotiation that have been necessary in successfully adapting mindfulness to the dominant (Western, secular) conceptions of sport psychology professional practice. Yet, by detaching it from its foundational roots and presenting it as a secular do-it-yourself solution, there is a danger that mindfulness may turn into just another self-help tool that could be unable to provide long-lasting benefit to the individual or society. The main argument against the universal and decontextualized representation of mindfulness anchors on the internalization of neoliberalism and the reinforcement of discipline and control to serve particular interests. To expound on this view, called out the corporate application of mindfulness for shifting the burden of change onto individual employees by framing stress as a personal dilemma and mindfulness as the remedy to help them stay calm and function efficiently, despite the potentially toxic environment. In the same way, the MBIs in sport and exercise psychology can be viewed as encouraging personal adjustment to circumstances (And implicitly ascribing responsibility to the 'unmindful' athlete for suffering). While the focus on the individual is not a specific feature of mindfulness-based approaches but rather characterizes many other theoretical approaches in sport psychology such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, humanistic psychology, psychodynamic approaches, and so forth, it is important to note that mindfulness traditionally involved a

more relational philosophy which was not focused on enhancing individual performance. In the way that mindfulness is presently considered in our discipline, there is a danger that it is used as the 'solution' without addressing the context in which distress occurs, such as unrealistic or unclear performance expectations, unreasonable time demands, intolerance for mistakes and imperfections, use of punishment to discipline or control behavior, employment of incentives that entrap athletes, or limited definitions of success. This, in our opinion, not only goes against the fundamental principles and ideology of mindfulness practice, but may also be considered ethically problematic and potentially detrimental to the overall health and well-being of athletes. As pointed out, the selective mindfulness apparent in Western discourses endorses neoliberal suppositions that everyone has the luxury to choose their responses, regulate emotions, and ultimately thrive in adversity through varied forms of self-care. The obsession with self-management behind the surge of mindfulness products, services, and applications has found fertile ground in the arena of sport. The values enshrined in the Olympic motto of *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, if unbridled, could inadvertently reinforce the ideology of capitalism that incites individuals to accelerate their pursuit of a faster, higher, and stronger version of the self. Underlying such a fascination with self-advancement is a neoliberal work ethic that values outdoing, outclassing, outperforming, and overtaking others, which is not congruent with the fundamental principles of Eastern mindfulness practices. In the world of competitive and elite sport, where sport psychology practitioners are hired to support the performance of individuals and teams, we can question whether the more original form of mindfulness practice can be realistically envisioned, or whether athletes would even care to engage. Nevertheless, we would like this paper to serve as a caution that the pursuit of an incessant growth of developing better, stronger, faster, and 'optimally functioning' athletes, without the parallel aims of personal growth and satisfaction, emotional regulation, stable psyche, and expansion/dissolution of the self, among others, may ultimately be unproductive and even detrimental to the overall health and well-being of those athletes. We, therefore, contend that any model of athletic excellence which subsumes mindfulness to an instrument of performance enhancement would benefit from at least deliberating on the spiritual, philosophical, and existential foundation from where it originates. It would otherwise be paradoxical to claim to implement the tenets of mindfulness (e.g., deceleration, letting go, and non-attachment) with athletes whilst simultaneously fixating on performance outcomes and expectations, often within a potentially toxic and harsh competitive environment.

The authors declare

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