

Mindfulness and Extending Constructivist Psychotherapy Integration

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Abstract

The growth of psychotherapies incorporating mindfulness techniques, inspired by Buddhist psychology, provides an opportunity for examining the relevance of mindfulness in furthering the progressive theoretical integration of constructivist psychotherapy, particularly since these approaches share similar metatheoretical assumptions. Psychotherapists have effectively cultivated clients' awareness and acceptance of their immediate sensations, thoughts, and phenomenal experience with positive effects. This article explores mindfulness theory and psychotherapeutic application, and discusses how constructivist psychology and Buddhist psychology can effectively contribute to each other's mutual elaboration and extension.

Mindfulness and Extending Constructivist Psychotherapy Integration

The past decade has witnessed an explosion of interest in Buddhist psychology and the application of Buddhist-inspired mindfulness methods in psychotherapy. These topics have clearly found acceptance within the mainstream of academic and professional psychology, as reflected in recent articles in major psychology journals (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Eckman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), including an entire edition of the APA journal *Emotion* on mindfulness (Williams, 2010). Recent books have described how Buddhist-oriented therapists have incorporated the use of a variety of Buddhist concepts and methods in psychotherapy (Dockett, Dudley-Grant, & Bankart, 2003; Epstein, 2007; Hick & Bien, 2008; Kaklauskas, Himanheminda, Hoffman, & Jack, 2008; Kwee, 2010; Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa, 2006; Magid, 2002; Segall, 2003; Watson, 1998). Additionally, many therapists using Western approaches to psychotherapy have adopted Buddhist-inspired mindfulness practices (Hayes, Follett, & Linehan, 2004; Hofman, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002, 2004). The growing use of mindfulness in psychotherapy raises the question of its potential relevance and utility for its integration with constructivist psychotherapies.

Buddhist-oriented psychologists, however, have expressed concern about the use of mindfulness in psychotherapy when it is disconnected from the broader metatheoretical, conceptual, and disciplinary underpinnings of Buddhist psychology (Kwee, 2010; McWilliams, in press b). At best, applying mindfulness techniques alone may omit consideration of Buddhism's much broader perspective on the human condition

and human liberation, missing out on its more powerful and comprehensive potential. At worst, use of mindfulness techniques alone may lead to a distortion of their intended meaning that could, if misused, prove harmful. Kwee (2010) emphasized the importance of maintaining the integrity of the broader Buddhist perspective, and suggests that social constructionism may provide a foundation for an authentic contemporary Buddhist psychology. Due to their shared view of the constructed nature of self, this proposition also applies to constructivist approaches more broadly (McWilliams, in press b).

Constructivist psychologists, as far back as Kelly (1955), have viewed constructivist psychotherapy as technically eclectic and open to productive dialogue with, and appropriating relevant techniques from, a variety of perspectives (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 2002). However, this openness does not mean that “anything goes” with respect to adopting any technique, and adopting methods without consideration of their ideological or metatheoretical contexts poses potential hazards of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and less than fully effective implementation (McWilliams, 1981; Norcross & Goldfried, 1992, 2005; Safran & Messer, 1997). Neimeyer (1993) addressed this concern within constructivist psychotherapy by proposing “Theoretically Progressive Integrationism,” which suggests that approaches that share compatible metatheoretical assumptions may be considered as providing a conceptual basis for explaining the value of particular therapeutic interventions as well as delineating and limiting appropriately relevant interventions (Feixas & Botella, 2004; Raskin, 2007; Walker & Winter, 2007). Constructivism, social constructivism, and Buddhism share fundamentally similar metatheoretical assumptions (Kwee, 2010; Kwee et al., 2006; McWilliams, 2009a; 2010; in press a, b), providing an intriguing opportunity for furthering and extending the

progressive theoretical integration of constructivist psychotherapies by examining Buddhist-inspired psychotherapeutic methods, particularly those that enhance mindfulness, defined as awareness and acceptance of present-moment experience.

This article 1) describes constructivist and Buddhist metatheoretical assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology, approaches to the self, and human functioning, 2) discusses the concept of mindfulness and its relationship to human well-being, including contemporary mindfulness research and theory, 3) describes examples of therapeutic methods that incorporate mindfulness, and 4) discusses synergistic ways that Buddhist and Constructivist psychology and psychotherapy might mutually inform and benefit each other.

Constructivism and Buddhism agree that we cannot justify any statement as ultimately true, and both view knowledge as evolving interdependently within personal and social contexts, and described in conventional, rather than ultimate, language. Thus, taking full responsibility for the interpretation of the cited literature, I embrace Rorty's (1982) suggestion that we can appropriate ideas that appear useful for our stated purposes and goals. Rather than proposing the definitive explanation of these topics as an inherently absolute account, I present a personally constructed perspective that inevitably reflects my experience and understanding.

Metatheory

Foundationalist philosophies historically proposed the existence of a mind-independent 'world as it is' and, and suggested that people possess cognitive capacities for gaining access to that world. This agenda has failed since we have never identified a way to grasp a mind-independent reality, shown that we can know the 'world as it is,' or

proven what ‘representations’ of the world actually represent (Chiari, 2010; Rockmore, 2004; Rorty, 1982). Pragmatism or constructivism, as a valid successor to failed foundationalism, proposes that we only know what we construct, and that a variety of human limitations constrain our constructions (Glaserfeld, 1995; Rockmore 2005; Rorty, 1982). Rather than viewing objects of understanding as discovered or revealed, the constructivist perspective suggests that we invent or develop knowledge, as interpretations of experience, and that such understanding emerges in historical contexts and depends on human activity. Thus, constructivists view knowledge as temporal, practical, and revisable rather than permanent or fixed.

A Process View of Ontology

Various constructivist perspectives employ differing views of the nature of ontology or reality, and their similarities and differences have received thorough and careful explication (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010; Raskin, 2002). Recognizing the hazard in simplifying their commonality, constructivists typically view the universe as integral, interconnected, and interrelated, in continuous change or flux, and lacking inherent nature or essence (Stojnov & Butt, 2002). This view accords well with a Buddhist perspective, which describes reality as “an assemblage of interlocking physical and mental processes that spring up and pass away subject to multifarious causes and conditions and that are always mediated by the cognitive apparatus embodied in the operation of the” perceiving person (Ronkin, 2009, p. 14). This ontological view presupposes that we might better understand phenomenal reality as events arising in a continuously changing process rather than as a container of fixed, stable substances.

Buddhist theory describes phenomenal experience in terms of three interrelated characteristics: dependent origination, impermanence, and emptiness, each of which demonstrates that phenomena do not possess an independent nature on their own (Garfield, 1995; Huntington, 1989; Luetchford, 2002; McWilliams, 2009). The concept of dependent origination proposes that perceptions that we identify as “things” depend on other events or “things” for their identity. Composites consist of parts, gain identity only as an assembly of parts, and lose that identity when taken apart, and identifying and acknowledging “things” requires the process of human perception and labeling. The concept of impermanence proposes that no phenomenon has always existed in its current state or will always exist in that state or with those qualities. Since phenomena come into existence when conditions supporting their existence occur, when those conditions no longer transpire the phenomena no longer exist. We cannot distinguish phenomena from the conditions that lead to their temporary existence and cannot identify a permanent fundamental nature that defines their identity. The concept of emptiness means that since phenomena exist only in interdependence on other phenomena and constantly change, we cannot isolate an essence or identity that exists inherently and independently and that constitutes the entity itself. Ultimately, we cannot find something to point to as the thing itself.

From this perspective, no *thing* exists on its own. Similarly to an epistemological constructivist view (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010) this perspective acknowledges that the world and the phenomena we experience do indeed exist. However, since entities do not possess their own independent, permanent, identity, any proposition suggesting that we can know “ultimate truth” proves incoherent. Perhaps as an alternative we might view

phenomena as real, but created afresh in each instant as a function of the ever-changing conditions of the moment.

A Pragmatic View of Epistemology

Constructivism suggests that humans, collectively and personally, impose structure and assign meaning to phenomenal experience based on human needs and experience. Ideas, explanations, and beliefs evolve within a social and historical context, and reflect changing perspectives and conventions rather than “the way the world is.” Humans use language to reflect on experience, make meaning, and cope with life. Since we cannot know reality directly, we describe experience in a variety of ways that arise from the human need and to anticipate future events, with no objective way of justifying beliefs as ultimately true. Rather than concern about the absolute “truth” of beliefs, we judge them by pragmatic truth criteria: their usefulness in predicting events, their coherence, and their fit with subsequent experience.

Constructivist approaches emerged in the context of pragmatism (Butt, 2005, 2006; McWilliams, 2009b), and scholars have also described Buddhism’s connection with pragmatism (Chinn, 2006; Kalupahana, 1986). From a pragmatic perspective, rather than trying to know things as they are in themselves, we might more usefully attempt to understand the nature of the process by which our experience of things arises. Similarly to constructivism, Buddhist psychology states that although we cannot make assertions about ultimate reality, we can know reality in conventional and relative terms and create “truth” within the structure of ordinary human assertions and social convention. Based on our experience of phenomena and our customary ways of understanding and speaking

about them, we may regard “things” relatively, and view “thing” as a description rather than an independently existing entity (Watts, 1961).

Conventional truth thus consists of ideas and beliefs that humans have developed by identifying recurrent patterns and themes in phenomenal experience and using them to anticipate future events. Similarly to Kelly’s (1955) description of the construing process, Buddhism describes the perception of similarities and differences, repeated themes and patterns, and the invention of word labels to describe the contrasting poles of dimensions. Contrasting poles arise together and depend on each other. For example, “good vs. bad,” “light vs. dark,” and “up vs. down” describe “empty” phenomena that do not possess these qualities inherently and depend on human assessment for their existence.

Radical constructivist Glasersfeld (1995) described how we cannot create just any reality we wish; since various environmental, biological, and social realities constrain a viable understanding that effectively serves human functions. Buddhist philosophy agrees that our conventions reflect biological, psychological, and social needs, as well as customs and language. Within these constraints, we can identify facts regarding what words mean and how to agree on empirical observations, but we cannot identify an independent viewpoint from which to justify these views as absolute (Garfield, 1995).

A Constructed View of Self

Constructivist and social constructionist approaches view the concept of “self” as a social and personal construction, arising in a particular social, cultural, and historical context, rather than an independently existing entity. (Epting & Amerikaner, 1980; Gergen, 1999; Hermans, 2003; Raskin, 2002; Raskin, 2006). Buddhist psychology,

similarly, applies the concepts of interdependence, impermanence, and emptiness to the concepts of “person” and “self” (McWilliams, 2000, 2004a). It views a person as a composite of five parts, elements, or attributes: physical body, sensations, perceptions and cognitions, predispositions and volitions, and consciousness. Each of these components arises in interdependent relationship with other phenomena. They continue to evolve and change from moment to moment and over the course of a human life, and we can only speak of the present organization of body, views, perception, etc. We can create a sense of permanence through narrative, but we cannot identify anything to point to as the “person” or a “self” independent of the constantly changing body, sensations, and thoughts.

Human Dysfunction & Well-Being

From a constructivist perspective, psychological dysfunction occurs when the system of meaning-making that a person creates for organizing and understanding experience interferes with meeting personal goals and considering more effective alternative ways of thinking, behaving, and meaning-making. Psychological well-being occurs when a person constructs a coherent set of interpretations that lead to effective anticipation of events, as defined by the experiencing person, and the ability to revise interpretations in light of their effectiveness.

In Buddhist psychology, viewing phenomena as dependent, impermanent, and empty and speaking about a conventional, constructed reality have practical implications. Psychological problems arise by confusing relative, dependent, impermanent, and empty conventional reality with inherent truth and ultimate reality, and treating conventional beliefs and concepts as ultimately true. When reified, constructed concepts like self,

objects of perception, and values and beliefs, lead to living in a delusional world. Suffering and dissatisfaction derive from attempts to impose permanence and independent essence on the flow of experience. The historical Buddha articulated the foundation of human dysfunction and dissatisfaction by enumerating four liberating propositions: 1) Life inherently entails unease, unsteadiness, turmoil, suffering, frustration, anxiety, fear, and dissatisfaction. 2) This unease results from craving, attachment, or clinging to our desire that life suit our expectations and our attempts to force the universe to conform to our desires. 3) Relief of suffering results from relinquishing clinging, desire, and attachment to beliefs about phenomena. 4) Understanding the impermanent nature of phenomena combined with mindfulness discipline and methods promote the process of reducing clinging to beliefs.

Ameliorating Dysfunction

When meanings that people create to understand and guide their lives fail to aid them in effectively negotiating their lives, constructive psychotherapy assist clients in examining and reconsidering these understandings. Therapists challenge existing constructions and assist clients in reconstructing their “life story,” inventing new self identities, and experimenting with alternative, more effective ways of meaning making (Bridges & Raskin, 2008), with a focus on the primacy of personal experience, the importance of novel enactments, and the role of language in creating personal meaning (G. Neimeyer, 1995, McWilliams, 2010).

Constructivist therapy strategies characteristically explore clients personal narratives and life metaphors, promote personal development and meaning making rather than correction, accept negative emotions as a normal component of change, emphasize

the individual's sense of self and core structures, empathically engage in the client's outlook, and view resistance as a reasonable protection of the client's meaning-making system (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010; R. Neimeyer, 1995, 2009). Clinical strategies in constructivist psychotherapy may include encouraging clients to adopt new behaviors, bringing unconscious knowledge into conscious awareness, assisting clients with retelling their personal stories, connecting clients' stories with their behavior, and viewing clients' problems in terms of language and social and cultural factors (Bridges & Raskin, 2008).

Buddhist methods attempt to deconstruct views of the world and the self in the world (Galín, 2003), and to cultivate a corrective view that incorporates interdependence, impermanence, and emptiness by contextualizing entities and avoiding reification. Cultivating awareness of the present moment, and the process of creating self and identity, helps overcome dissatisfaction and achieve well-being. For example, by loosening identification with social roles we can see them as a "game" with rules based on social convention rather than as the inherent nature of reality (Watts, 1961). Understanding emptiness and the conventional nature of reality require moment-to-moment awareness of how constructs arise, become reified, and the process by which impermanent, empty phenomena come to be treated as ultimately, rather than conventionally, real.

A variety of meditation techniques cultivate awareness of thoughts and experiencing the emptiness of phenomena, with the goal of liberation from dogmatic clinging to reified concepts, including self (McWilliams, 2003, 2004b). Walsh and Shapiro (2006), describe meditation as "a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater

voluntary control (pp. 228-229). In contrast to constructivist methods that focus on fabricating more effective worldviews, meditation focuses on the *process* that creates worldviews out of immediate sensations, by observing how beliefs and opinions circumvent the experience of the present moment, and creates a sense of an independent self. The sense of a separate self begins to fall away through the practice of observing thoughts and bodily sensations. From a perspective of “no self,” meaning derives from immediate physical experience and awareness rather than from a constructed narrative.

Elucidating Mindfulness

The contemporary psychology literature on mindfulness reveals recurrent themes among a variety of authors and perspectives. Brown and colleagues (Brown & Ryan, 2003, Brown et al., 2007) define mindfulness as “*a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience*” (2007, p. 212, italics in original). They identify *awareness* as consciously registering stimuli from the five physical senses, including kinesthetic senses, as well as activities of the mind, and *attention* as intentionally noticing the experience, treating events as phenomena in consciousness rather than as constructed concepts or inherent entities. They describe mindful awareness as clear, non-conceptual, flexible, stable, and present-oriented. Shapiro et al. (2006) add two additional characteristics to the emphasis on attention: intention and attitude. *Intention* refers to mindfulness as an activity undertaken “on purpose” with a dynamically evolving understanding or vision of why to practice mindfulness. *Attitude* refers to an explicitly accepting, open, receptivity to experience without judgment, evaluation, interpretation, or striving for change. Cardaciotto et al. (2008) summarize these characteristics by conceptualizing “mindfulness as the tendency to be highly aware of one’s internal and

external experiences in the context of an accepting, nonjudgmental stance toward those experiences (p. 205, italics in original).” Hofman et al. (2010) characterize the mental stage of mindfulness as “nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment experience, including one’s sensations, thoughts, bodily states, consciousness, and the environment while encouraging openness, curiosity, and acceptance” p. 169. To synthesize, we can view mindfulness as intentionally focusing on evident, sensory experience, which consists of momentary physical sensations and arising thoughts, combined with a willingness to experience these phenomena as they actually appear, with acceptance and curiosity.

Mindfulness in Psychotherapy

Many Western psychotherapists operating from a Buddhist perspective have incorporated mindfulness methods in their psychotherapy practice, (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Epstein, 2007; Kaklauskas, et al., 2008; Magid, 2002; Mohan, 2003; Rothaupt and Morgan, 2007, Rubin, 1996; Segall, 2003; Watson, 1998). They emphasize awareness of the *process* of thinking and feeling, rather than focusing on the *content* of thoughts and feelings. Helping clients develop the ability to observe thoughts and mental processes assists them in accepting experiences without either clinging to them or trying to change them, and facilitates seeing through the delusion of a fixed self. Techniques often include awareness of breath and sensations, observing feelings, encouraging clients to “label, acknowledge, experience, and let go of their experiences” (Khong, 2003a p. 48), cultivating an attitude of direct experience and bare attention to thoughts and sensations as they arise (Khong 2003b), and emphasizing the difference between modifying mental content and gaining awareness of the mind’s processes (Khong, 2006).

These methods incorporate the related mindfulness concepts of awareness and acceptance. Although they interact in a seamless and interrelated manner, we can benefit from differentiating them as ways of attending to the present moment with precision and clarity. To help understand these methods from a constructivist perspective, I explicate several components of awareness and acceptance, along with examples of psychotherapy techniques that employ them.

Awareness of Thoughts. Many approaches to psychotherapy, including constructivist approaches, focus attention on mental processes, the words that clients use to give meaning to their experience, and the recurrent patterns of thoughts and beliefs. While cognitive psychotherapy might focus on “correcting” “invalid” thoughts, constructivist psychotherapy helps the client to develop more personally useful and meaningful beliefs and to attend to their consequences. In both cases, therapy attends to the content of the thoughts. Mindfulness-oriented approaches focus instead on the process of thinking instead of the content, identifying the context in which thoughts arise.

For example, Efran (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990) describes human life as a meaningless “drift” to which people add purpose and infer meaning. Thoughts arise without conscious decision, and words like choice and free will, although they affect people’s lives, do not represent a separate reality. Thus, some words and concepts prove ineffective, and effective living benefits from a more accurate understanding of how thought processes function. He addresses the psychological *context*, the individual’s presuppositions that normally operate in the background. By labeling and describing contexts, clients can experience how contextualized thoughts arise and dissolve away.

Similarly, Segal et al. (2002, 2004) distinguish between *metacognitive knowledge* as used in cognitive behavioral therapies, which helps clients recognize inaccurate cognitions, and *metacognitive insight*, which assists clients in directly experiencing thoughts as events in awareness, rather than reflecting external reality. Therapy encourages clients to view thoughts and feelings as ever-changing events and to experience specific thoughts and feelings as they appear, helping clients to recognize their tendency toward “self-perpetuating patterns of ruminative negative thought” (Segal et al., 2002, p. 75). It changes the focus from the *content* of the thought to the *process*, by identifying a “doing mode,” which focuses on the discrepancy between desires and actual experience along with “should” and “oughts,” which focus on changing an unsatisfactory experience.

Awareness of Sensations. Conscious experience falls into two categories: sensations and thoughts. When reacting to sensations on the basis of conditioning, often without clear awareness, thoughts can come to dominate conscious experience. Mindfulness can help gain awareness of and detachment from that process. Sensations provide the primary access to phenomenal experience, the only connection with the environment (whether internal or external). As such, paying attention to sensations helps gather information effectively and respond appropriately. Because of the tendency toward automatic responses and getting caught in thoughts, paying clear and careful attention to sensations requires skill and discipline. Awareness practices assist in directing attention to physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch, as they arise and fall away. They also, as stated above, provide the raw “information” necessary to attend to the environment, and its relevance to survival and to meeting goals. The

ability to respond effectively to the world depends on awareness of emotional, bodily reactions to phenomenal events (Rogers, 1959). Within Kelly's (1955) personal scientist metaphor, effective responding to the environment requires attending to the "data," the outcomes of our experiments, which often entail emotional experiences.

Thus, full awareness of the present moment not only includes the experience of thoughts and beliefs; it also includes bodily experiences and awareness of sensations. Leitner (Leitner & Faidley, 2008; Leitner & Thomas, 2003) sees the division between mind and body as an arbitrary human construction that unnecessarily restricts the utility of psychotherapy. Based on the assumption of an integral universe, personal meanings impact bodily systems. He addresses how psychological meaning-making processes manifest in the physiological experience of bodily sensations and events.

Core construing develops prior to language, and the ability to trust bodily experiences, through confirmation and disconfirmation, evolves along with the development of pre-verbal constructs. As a verbalized meaning system develops, initially sensed bodily confirmations embed more deeply, but people tend to focus on verbal labels and descriptions rather than the bodily experience itself. Exercises that help clients develop greater bodily awareness, as well as explorations about how and why they prevent themselves from experiencing the bodily connection, can assist therapeutic growth. As clients attend to bodily communications about their core constructs, they gain greater clarity and understanding regarding how meanings facilitate and hinder effective living. Techniques that enhance awareness of bodily experiences, such as relaxation training and mindfulness training, may have psychotherapeutic power to the extent that

therapy draws a connection between bodily processes and meaning-making (Leitner & Faidley, 2008).

Block (2005) describes a process he calls “bridging” to shift awareness from the self-centered, rigid, and exclusive sense of overall identity that restricts the ability to attend to actual experience to immediate physical sensations, such as sights, sounds, or bodily sensations. Doing so “rests” or places on “idle” the thoughts that constitute identity, “befriending” them by recognizing and gaining familiarity with them, and experiencing how they restrict experience of life. By shifting attention to immediate bodily experience, thoughts “take a backseat” to sensations, awareness expands, and the body relaxes. Bridging does not strive for relaxation, which would constitute yet another identity system requirement, but rather acknowledges and accepts actual experience.

Acceptance of experience. Acceptance does not mean resignation to the situation. Rather, it means acknowledging the reality of phenomenal events in their fullest, as a basis for taking effective action. “Acceptance means seeing the facts for what they are now and looking forward from there—‘what needs to be done now’?” (Magid, 2008, P. 110). Teaching clients to accept life completely as it is as well as to initiate appropriate change emphasizes openness to experience without distortion or judgment, which does not entail appraising the experience positively.

Efran et al. (1990) assist clients in noticing operations of the mind, acknowledging and accepting them rather than trying to change or combat the mind’s content. Like meditation, “the objective is not to directly banish troublesome thoughts or extinguish unwanted behaviors. In fact, as many therapists have learned, directly challenging the mind is generally a futile exercise” (Efran & Soler-Baillo, 2008, p. 91).

Hayes (2004), working from a contextualist perspective, defines psychological health as living in accordance with personally chosen values while also maintaining contact with immediately experienced bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. His interventions aim to increase acceptance of experience, make personal choices, and take appropriate action by reducing the tendency to fuse thoughts with experience, weakening experiential avoidance, accepting troublesome sensations, feelings, and thoughts willingly, contacting a sense of experience that transcends ever-changing thoughts and sensations, clarifying important life values, committing to behaving in accordance with those values, and continuously attending to, acknowledging, and accepting thoughts and feelings. Interventions include paradoxical language techniques, confronting clients with the consequences of avoidance, deliberate exposure to unpleasant experiences, observing self-processes, clarifying meaning and values, and monitoring commitment to actions.

Similarly, Segal et al. (2002, 2004) teach clients a “being mode” in which, rather than attempting to implement change, the client accepts and allows thoughts and feelings to pass through awareness. By tolerating the discomfort that normally leads clients to “do something” to fix it, clients experience freshness and freedom. Robins, Schmidt, and Linehan (2004) also assist clients to develop a more accurate worldview and more effective behaviors through use of radical acceptance, by observing and participating in the moment without judgment, and adopting effective new action.

Extending Constructivist Psychotherapy Integration

Constructivist psychotherapy and Buddhist-inspired psychotherapy share fundamental metatheoretical assumptions regarding the interconnected, integral, and ever-changing nature of the universe and a view of knowledge as constructed by humans

as a means of organizing their experience, making meaning, guiding actions, and achieving goals. Metatheoretical compatibility provides a necessary starting condition for considering an approach for theoretically progressive integration. The rationale for integrating mindfulness with constructivist psychotherapy could benefit from a further explication of the relevance of these Buddhist-inspired techniques to the goals of constructivist psychotherapy, as well as the value of constructivist methods for enhancing a contemporary Buddhist psychology.

Constructivist psychology's emphasis on the use of meaning-making as a way to anticipate future events, enhance survival, and meet human goals might provide a useful context for considering the relevance of Buddhist psychology. People develop meaning-based theories or beliefs based on their perception of recurrent patterns of experience, test their beliefs and interpretations by identifying goals and establishing hypotheses for anticipating future events, attend to the actual outcome of predicted events, and revise understanding based on the extent to which the current events validate the anticipation. As stated earlier, constructivism defines psychological well-being as the extent to which a person's interpretations lead to validated anticipations and revision in light of their predictive effectiveness.

A Buddhist view of psychological well-being can support the constructivist perspective by emphasizing how acknowledging the ever-changing essenceless nature of phenomenal experience, and distinguishing disruptive thoughts and emotions from useful ones, can assist in more effective anticipation (Ekman et al., 2005). Wallace and Shapiro (2006) describe a Buddhist view of psychological well-being in terms of mental balance among four interconnected components: conative (intention, volition, and goals),

attentional (sustained mindful, voluntary, attention), cognitive (engaging with experience as it arises moment-by-moment without preconception) and affective (emotional regulation such as equanimity and lack of vacillation, apathy, or inappropriate emotion), providing clear examples of mind-sets useful to the effective anticipation of events and revision of understanding. Effective personal functioning includes creating meaningful hypotheses, which requires clear articulation of personally relevant goals (Hayes, 1993). Conative balance emphasizes establishing realistic desires and goals that will lead to fulfillment for the self and others. Likewise, generating theories and testing hypotheses effectively requires the ability to focus sustained attention on relevant events and the observation process itself. Mindful awareness practice enhances attentional balance and the ability to monitor mental states and interpretations of experience as they occur. Effective development of meaning-based understanding, testing hypotheses, and revising understanding requires openness to perceiving and experiencing events clearly and the ability to consider alternative perspectives.

Wallace and Shapiro (2006) describe this capability as cognitive balance, which “entails engaging with the world of experience without imposing conceptual assumptions or ideas on events and thereby misapprehending or distorting them” (p. 696). Cognitive balance includes attending to the present-moment experience of sensations, perceptions, emotions, and mental processes. Constructivist methods that help to identify and articulate core constructs and strategies, including such techniques as repertory grids, laddering, and self-characterization, can enhance awareness of these mental processes. Finally, well-being and effective meaning-making may benefit from emotional

equilibrium, avoiding extremes of hyperactivity or apathy, by cultivating affective balance through equanimity, empathy, compassion, and caring.

Buddhist-inspired methods that foster greater mindful awareness of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, attention to immediate events, and acceptance of actual experience may thus enhance human effectiveness from a constructivist perspective, and augment constructivist psychotherapy. Awareness of the *processes* underlying the use of thoughts and language, rather than attachment to their *content*, may help liberate clients from clinging to rigid dysfunctional thoughts and actions, promoting more effective construing and clearer perception of events. These skills support a larger sense of meaning, freedom from automatic responses and rigid identifications, and more flexible ways of addressing ever-changing events. The examples discussed above demonstrate that contemporary psychotherapists have effectively applied mindfulness methods to a variety of approaches with a variety of client populations. These methods may assist in further strengthening the effectiveness, relevance, and utility of constructivist psychotherapy, and contributing to its theoretically progressive integration and on-going elaboration. Additionally, their use within the larger shared Constructivist/Buddhist metatheoretical context may provide additional ways of elaborating a contemporary constructivist Buddhist psychology, thereby demonstrating a synergy that can further the development of both perspectives.

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