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Mindfulness and the college transition: The efficacy of a mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention in fostering adjustment among first-year students

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Abstract

Within recent years, there has been a marked proliferation in the interest in and relevant literature pertaining to the practice of mindfulness. This study sought to augment this knowledge base through an examination of the efficacy of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) intervention in fostering adjustment among first-year college students. Fifty-six (N=56) first-year participants from two Midwestern liberal arts institutions partook in the study. Experimental participants (n=29) completed an eight-week MBSR intervention conducted by a qualified instructor. Control participants (n=27) did not receive mindfulness instruction. Adjustment indices were gathered using the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), providing individual scores on one primary full scale and four subscales. Experimental participants further completed a Five Factor Model (FFM) mindfulness questionnaire consisting of five facets during both pre- and post-intervention assessment periods. Statistical analyses indicated significant gender differences among the SACQ Full Scale and Social Adjustment and Attachment subscales, with males scoring higher. Additionally, experimental participants scored higher on the Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale relative to the control condition. Apart from statistical significance, however, the experimental condition scored higher relative to the control on all five SACQ scales. Further analyses indicated that post-intervention scores on the Nonreactivity, Observing/Attending, and Describing/Labeling facets were significantly higher among experimental participants when compared to pre-intervention assessments. This study suggests that mindfulness, as part of a MBSR intervention, serves as a beneficial practice in contributing to first-year student adjustment and acclimation to the college environment.

Introduction

Mindfulness, as described by its Western developer Jon Kabat-Zinn, involves the nonjudgmental awareness of one's inner experience in the present moment (as cited in Philippot & Segal, 2009). Derived from this understanding is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a therapeutic intervention engendering mindful principles through the regular practice of various contemplative techniques.

Given the frenetic, highly-competitive nature of contemporary university life, college campuses appear to be ideal locales for examining the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions, particularly as they pertain to first-year students. Indeed, the first-year transition can be particularly distressing for young adults—new living responsibilities, greater academic demands, and the navigation of unknown social waters may all pose serious risks to first-years' psychological, emotional, and physical health.

Research into the efficacy of MBSR and other mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions has illustrated mindfulness' benefits for students, including reductions in anxiety (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998); stress (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008); and depression (Lynch, Gander, Kohls, Kudielka, & Walach, 2011). Further studies have suggested that mindfulness can indeed be developed (e.g. Lynch et al., 2011), an exciting prospect given its association with well-being. Relative few studies, however, have looked beyond these broad factors and how these benefits may contribute to more general student adjustment. It is this very gap in the literature that this study aims to fill.

Method

Participants

- Participants drawn from College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University student body
- Total of fifty-six (N=56) student participants
- Experimental participants (n=29) consisted of two sections of first-year students enrolled in common curriculum First Year Seminar (FYS) course
 - Male (n=14), Female (n=15)
- Control participants (n=27) drawn from Introductory Psychology course
 - Male (n=6), Female (n=21)
- All participants were students who returned spring semester 2014

Procedure/Materials

- Experimental FYS sections completed an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction intervention conducted by a qualified instructor
 - Consisted of two-hour long, once-weekly meetings
- Control participants did not receive mindfulness instruction
- All participants completed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), an empirically-validated index of student acclimation to the college environment
 - Consists of one primary Full Scale and four subscales: 1) Academic Adjustment; 2) Social Adjustment; 3) Personal-Emotional Adjustment; and 4) Attachment
 - Completed during the tenth week of fall semester 2013
 - All SACQ scores were converted to standardized percentile rankings for both male and female cohorts
- Experimental participants completed a Five Factor Model (FFM) mindfulness questionnaire
 - Consists of five facets: 1) Nonreactivity; 2) Observing/Attending; 3) Acting with Awareness; 4) Describing/Labeling; and 5) Nonjudgmentalism
 - Taken pre- and post-intervention
 - Assessment represents an aggregate of various mindfulness measures

Results

- Analyses of the mean difference among SACQ full- and subscales between genders and experimental and control conditions were conducted by a two-way analysis of variance using IBM's SPSS program (Figures 1, 2):
 - On the Full Scale index, males (n=20) ($M=69.95, SD=24.71$) scored higher than females (n=36) ($M=44.92, SD=29.88$), $F(1, 52)= 7.43, p < .01$
 - On the Social Adjustment subscale, males ($M=71.45, SD=23.24$) scored higher than females ($M=43.83, SD=27.15$), $F(1, 52)= 13.55, p < .01$
 - On the Attachment subscale, males ($M=66.65, SD=28.00$) scored higher than females ($M=46.61, SD=27.61$), $F(1, 52)= 7.16, p < .01$
 - On the Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale, the experimental condition ($M=52.41, SD=30.84$) scored higher than the control condition ($M=36.67, SD=24.38$), $F(1, 52)= 4.12, p < .05$
 - Apart from statistical significance, the experimental condition scored higher relative to the control on all five scales

Figure 1

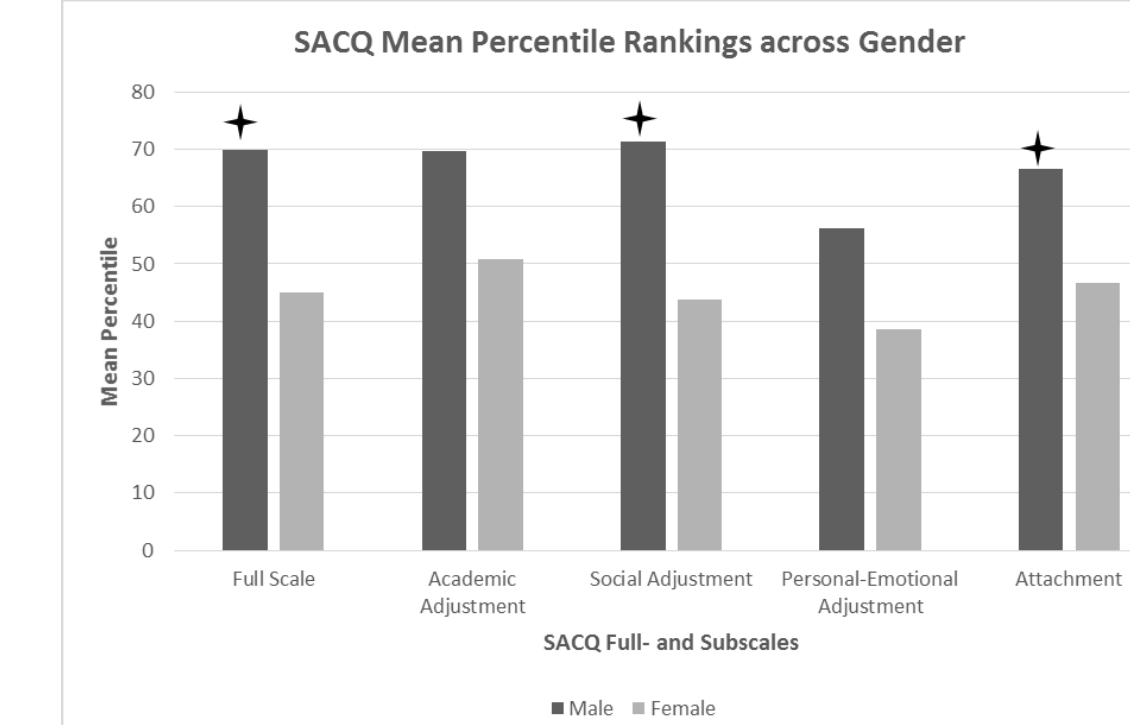


Figure 2

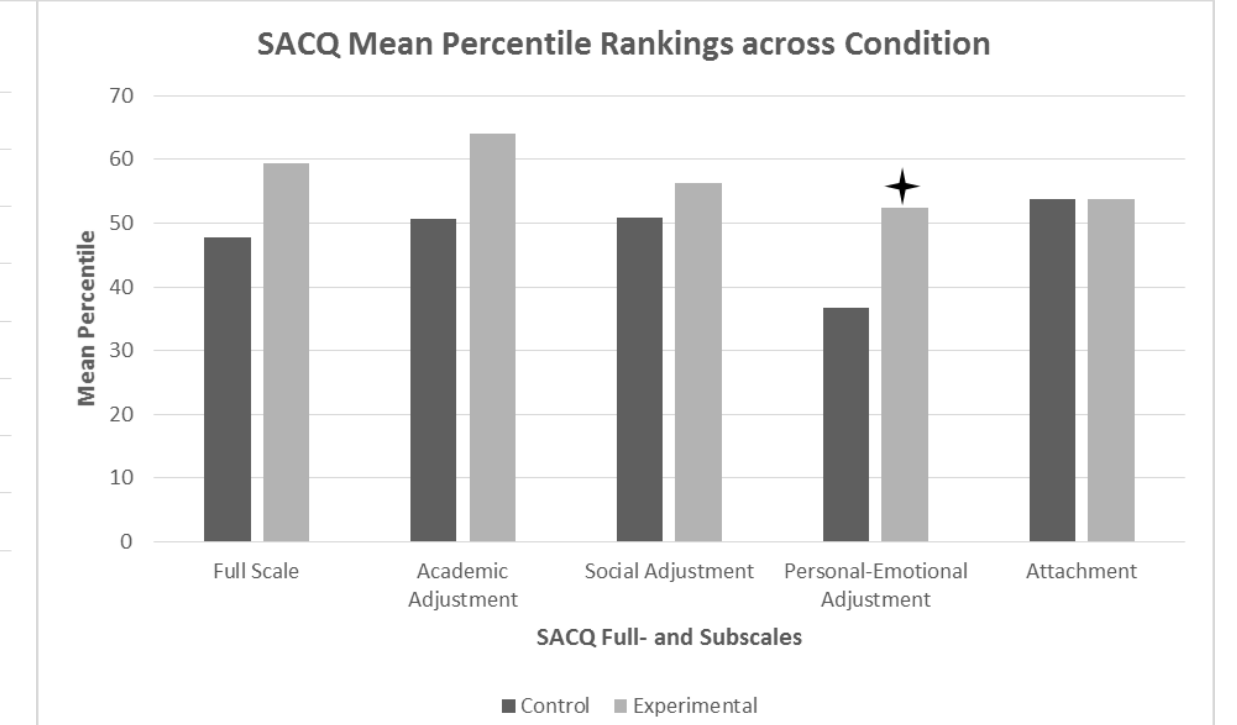
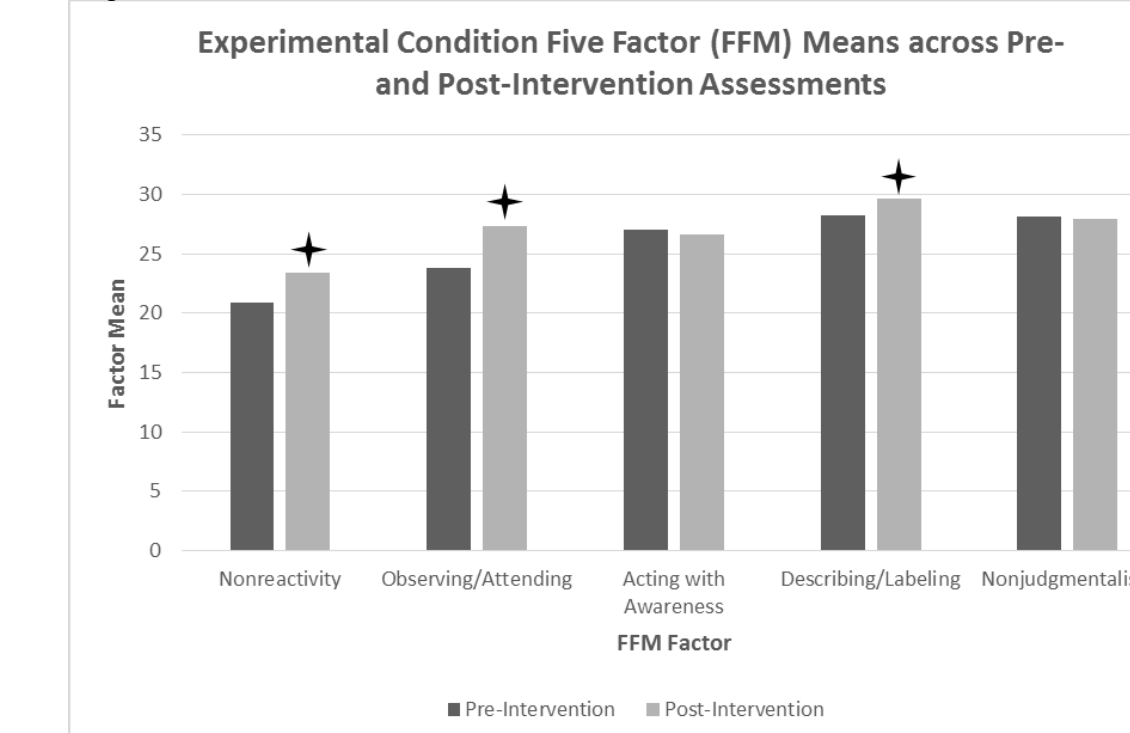


Figure 3



+ Denotes statistically significant difference ($p < .05$)

- Paired-samples t-tests were utilized to compare pre- and post-intervention levels of each facet of the Five Factor Model among experimental participants (Figure 3)
- Twenty-six (n=26) of twenty-nine participants completed both pre- and post-intervention FFM assessments and were included in analyses:
 - Mean difference in Nonreactivity pre- ($M=20.85, SD=4.66$) and post-intervention ($M=23.42, SD=3.50$) was significant, $t(25)= -3.21, p < .01$
 - Mean difference in Observing/Attending pre- ($M=23.85, SD=4.50$) and post-intervention ($M=27.38, SD=4.05$) was significant, $t(25)= -4.73, p < .01$
 - Mean difference in Describing/Labeling pre- ($M=28.23, SD=6.32$) and post-intervention ($M=29.62, SD=5.63$) was significant, $t(25)= -2.52, p < .05$

Conclusions

- Results indicate that mindfulness practice serves as an effective means of cultivating adjustment among first-year college students
- Our use of a sample of enrolled students, less subject to volunteer bias, represents a unique break from current mindfulness literature and suggests the potential benefits of MBSR to a broader population beyond those who may be particularly drawn to the approach
- Effect sizes, although small, are notable given the numerous factors underlying first-year adjustment
- Significant and wide-spread gender differences, despite standardization, may suggest the need for re-norming the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire
- Future research considerations:
 - Minimizing costs and labor-intensiveness of instruction
 - Effective and efficient incorporation of mindfulness into the first-year experience

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