

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP MINDFULNESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELATIONAL WELL-BEING IN COMMITTED COUPLES

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Relationship mindfulness is the degree to which individuals tend to be mindful during interactions with romantic partners. In this study, we examined both the intrapersonal and interpersonal links between relationship mindfulness and psychological and relationship functioning in a sample of 219 couples who had been in their relationship for at least 1 year. Even when accounting for the general tendency to be mindful, relationship mindfulness was linked with markers of relationship well-being and psychological functioning, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. The findings bring to light the importance of considering relationship mindfulness in clinical work with couples that focuses on addressing deficiencies in relationship or psychological well-being.

Scientific and clinical interest in trait mindfulness—the tendency to be attentive to and aware of what is taking place in present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003)—has grown exponentially in recent years. Although researchers have documented significant associations between trait mindfulness and markers of psychological and relational well-being (e.g., Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015; Lenger, Gordon, & Nguyen, 2017), measuring trait mindfulness without accounting for the contextual factors involving one's level of mindfulness may be problematic. Individuals, no matter their general tendency to be mindful, are not mindful all the time or equally mindful across all contexts. Furthermore, being mindful in certain contexts may be more consequential to one's psychological and relational well-being than one's general tendency to be mindful; therefore, one's general tendency to be mindful may not always be as clinically relevant as when and with whom one is mindful.

The tendency to be mindful in the context of a romantic relationship may play an important role in psychological and relational well-being. Being mindful in this context is considerably different from being mindful during other day-to-day experiences, such as participating in a discussion with colleagues or waiting in line at a store. Even compared to other social contexts, romantic relationships are exceptional in that they involve a greater level of intimacy and closeness, giving them the power to be a major source of happiness as well as a source of deep emotional pain. The tendency to be mindful in the context of romantic relationships has been identified as relationship mindfulness (Kimmes, Jaurequi, May, Srivastava, & Fincham, 2017). Preliminary research shows

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that, compared to trait mindfulness, relationship mindfulness has a stronger positive association with positive relationship quality, as well as a stronger inverse association with negative relationship quality, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment (Kimmes et al., 2017).

Initial findings regarding relationship mindfulness suggest that it may be a promising target for clinical interventions. However, the associations between relationship mindfulness and relationship outcomes need to be replicated and extended to the study of clinically relevant psychological outcomes, such as perceived stress or depression. At the interpersonal level, there is also the need to examine whether one's relationship mindfulness is associated with partner psychological and relationship outcomes. Due to the interdependence between partners, it is possible that each partner's level of relationship mindfulness is related to the other partner's evaluation of the relationship (Karremans, Schellekens, & Kappen, 2017). Therefore, elucidating of the role of relationship mindfulness in psychological and relationship well-being from a dyadic perspective may help elevate relationship mindfulness as a potential target for clinical interventions.

The primary aim of this study was to explore whether relationship mindfulness may be useful in understanding psychological and relationship outcomes in the dyadic context, even when accounting for trait mindfulness. To accomplish this aim, we collected data from a sample of committed couples and then analyzed the data so that the intrapersonal and interpersonal associations between relationship mindfulness and psychological and relational outcomes (i.e., stress and depression, positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality) could be examined.

Trait Mindfulness, Relationship Mindfulness, and Relational Outcomes

Trait mindfulness is linked with numerous psychosocial tendencies that predict stronger, more satisfying romantic relationships. For example, trait mindfulness positively relates to empathic concern and perspective taking (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Trait mindfulness is also directly linked with markers of relationship functioning, including increased marital satisfaction (Jones, Welton, Oliver, & Thoburn, 2011) and lower risk for relationship dissolution (Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010). Trait mindfulness may also play a role in the way in which individuals engage in conflict discussions with romantic partners. For example, trait mindfulness is significantly and positively linked to more constructive communication behaviors during couple conflict and negatively linked to experienced and expressed emotional negativity during and following couple conflict (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). It is reasonable to assume that trait mindfulness is related to the tendency to have a clear awareness of and pay attention to what is occurring in the present moment when interacting with a romantic partner, and trait mindfulness therefore likely to play a role in the way romantic partners behave in and evaluate the relationship.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of research on mindfulness in couple relationships has been conducted using measures of trait mindfulness, but, as noted earlier, trait mindfulness may vary across contexts and thus be less than optimal as an indicator of mindfulness in romantic relationships. Including measures of relationship mindfulness in studies of mindfulness and romantic relationships therefore has the potential to yield new insights and avenues for inquiry in this area.

Indeed, there is already some evidence to show that relationship mindfulness accounts for a variance in positive and negative relationship quality over and beyond that which is associated with trait mindfulness (Kimmes et al., 2017). However, this finding was obtained using a sample of college students in a romantic relationship who were about 20 years old, on average, and about 40% of these participants reported being in their current romantic relationship for 1 year or less. Mindfulness may play a more central role in committed relationships (Karremans et al., 2017) and in the relationship quality of individuals who are older in age (Lenger, Gordon, & Nguyen, 2019). It is important to note, therefore, that the average age of participants in the present study was over 35, nearly three quarters of the couples in the present study reported being married, and the average relationship length of these couples was almost 11 years. With that in mind, the present study uniquely explores the links between relationship mindfulness and relationship quality in a sample of couples for whom mindfulness may play a more important role.

Trait and Relationship Mindfulness and Psychological Outcomes

Trait mindfulness is associated with enhanced psychological functioning. Individuals high in trait mindfulness demonstrate an increased tendency to adeptly identify and alter psychological states to

fulfill basic psychological needs (Brown & Ryan, 2003). For instance, mindfulness is incompatible with worry, rumination, and the suppression of thoughts and emotions, all of which are associated with depression and stress (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005). Indeed, a large body of research indicates a strong negative association between trait mindfulness and poor psychological functioning such as depression and the stress response (for a review, see Tomlinson, Yousaf, Vittersø, & Jones, 2018).

Although there appears to be clear evidence to support trait mindfulness as beneficial to psychological functioning, studies evaluating trait mindfulness largely focus on its salutatory effects outside the context central to the lives of individuals, such as romantic relationships. This may limit inferences from previous findings, as romantic relationships uniquely affect psychological functioning (Whisman & Baucom, 2012). Studies that include measures of both trait mindfulness and relationship mindfulness may be useful in elucidating whether mindfulness in the context of romantic relationships is significantly linked with psychological functioning, even when accounting for trait mindfulness.

Interdependency in Mindfulness and Relational and Psychological Outcomes

Individual traits influence outcomes for the individual and for their partner (Kashy & Kenny, 1999). Thus, the associations between trait mindfulness and psychological and relational functioning likely extend from the individual to their partner. Indeed, interpersonal processes of trait mindfulness with relationship and psychological well-being have been previously illustrated in research studies. For example, higher trait mindfulness in one partner is associated with lower withdrawal behaviors and higher support behaviors in the other partner (Barnes et al., 2007). Similarly, individual trait mindfulness positively and significantly relates to partners' perceptions of support and responsiveness as well as marital satisfaction (Williams & Cano, 2014). In another study, trait mindfulness was associated with self and partner marital quality in a sample of military couples (Zamir, Gewirtz, & Zhang, 2017). Despite the intrapersonal nature of mindfulness, there is evidence to suggest a person's capacity to be mindful can be accurately evaluated by outside observers (May & Reinhardt, 2018). In sum, empirical evidence supports the notion that trait mindfulness relates to the psychological and relationship functioning for the individual and their partner. Although not altogether absent, the few studies incorporating an interpersonal approach are limited by the measures of mindfulness used which have not been sensitive to context. Thus, the way in which the tendency to be mindful in romantic relationships is associated with own and partner's psychological and relationship functioning remains to be documented.

Present Study

In this study, we investigate relationship mindfulness in terms of its intrapersonal and interpersonal associations with psychological outcomes (i.e., depression and perceived stress) and relational outcomes (i.e., positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality) using the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Guided by the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, we test four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: After controlling for males' and females' trait mindfulness, males' and females' relationship mindfulness will have a own positive relationship quality and an inverse association with their own negative relationship quality.

Hypothesis 2: Males' and females' relationship mindfulness will have a significant positive association with their partner's positive relationship quality and a significant negative association with their partner's negative relationship quality, even after controlling for males' and females' trait mindfulness.

Hypothesis 3: After controlling for males' and females' trait mindfulness, males' and females' relationship mindfulness will have significant negative associations with one's own depression and perceived stress.

Hypothesis 4: Males' and females' relationship mindfulness will have significant negative associations with their partner's depression and perceived stress, even after controlling for males' and females' trait mindfulness.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Couples residing in the United States were recruited by Qualtrics to complete an online survey. The inclusion criteria for participation were as follows: (a) the couples were in a romantic relationship for 1 year or longer and (b) partners were over the age 18. Each partner completed the survey separately, and it took about thirty minutes for each partner to complete. The survey was accessed a total of 906 times, and 226 couples passed the screening process and agreed to participate. Data from seven couples were excluded from the analyses due to one or both partners completing the survey in fewer than 10 minutes, resulting in a sample of 218 couples that were included in the analyses.

The average age of the men in the sample was 39.05 ($SD = 11.67$), and the average age of the women in the sample was 35.90 ($SD = 10.97$). About 73.5% of the couples were married, 13.7% were engaged, and 12.8% were dating exclusively. On average, couples had been together for 10.92 ($SD = 9.65$) years. The racial/ethnic makeup of the sample is as follows: 71.7% Caucasian, 8.5% Latino/a or Hispanic, 10.4% African American, 1.1% Caribbean, 1.3% South Asian, 3% East Asian, 2% Native American, and 2% identified as other. The highest levels of education participants reported completing were as follows: 13.9% completed more than 4 years of college, 22.6% completed 4 years of college, 34% completed some college, 24.2% completed high school, and 5.2% did not complete high school. In terms of meditation experience (e.g., mindfulness and transcendental meditation), 55.5% of participants reported having no experience, followed by 25.6% with a little experience, 13.9% with some experience, and 5% reported having a lot of experience.

Measures

Perceived stress. The 10-item version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen & Williamson, 1988) was used to assess perceived stress in this study. Respondents rated questions on a scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often* (e.g., "How often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?"). For each participant, the average score of the ten items was calculated for use in the analyses. Reliability for this scale was acceptable for men ($\alpha = .85$) and for women ($\alpha = .84$).

Depression. Depression was measured using an abbreviated version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies—Depression Scale (CES-D; Santor & Coyne, 1997). This scale comprised 7 items (e.g., "I felt depressed." and "I felt sad."), and potential responses ranged from 1 = *rarely or none of the time* to 4 = *most of the time*. The responses from the seven items were used to calculate an average score for each participant. Coefficient alpha was .84 for women and .86 for men.

Relationship quality. Perception of relationship quality was measured using the Positive-Negative Relationship Quality (PN-RQ; Rogge, Fincham, Crasta, & Maniaci, 2017) scale. The PN-RQ contains four items relating to positive relationship quality (e.g., "strong" and "pleasant"), and four items relating to negative quality (e.g., "fragile" and "miserable"). Responses range from 1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Extremely*, and the average score across each four-item subscale was calculated for use in the statistical models. For women, coefficient alpha was .94 for the positive quality subscale and .95 for the negative quality subscale. For men, coefficient alpha was .95 for both the positive and negative quality subscales.

Trait mindfulness. Mindfulness was measured using the 5-item version of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Van Dam, Earleywine, & Borders, 2010). Example items include, "It seems I am 'running on automatic' without much awareness of what I'm doing" and "I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I'm doing right now to get there" with responses ranging from 1 = *almost always* and 6 = *almost never* (Brown & Ryan, 2003). For each participant, the mean score for the five items was calculated; items were coded such that

higher scores indicate a greater general tendency to be mindful. Coefficient alpha was .90 for women and .89 for men.

Relationship mindfulness. Relationship mindfulness or the propensity for individuals to be mindful within a romantic relationship was measured using the Relationship Mindfulness Measure (RMM; Kimmes et al., 2017). This measure includes questions to assess the ability to be present and mindful within the relationship (e.g., “I have conversations with my partner without being really attentive,” or “When I’m with my partner, I find myself saying or doing things without paying attention”). Participant responses range from 1 = *almost always* to 6 = *almost never*, with higher scores indicating more relationship mindfulness. Coefficient alpha in the present sample was .87 for women and .89 for men.

Analytic Plan

Values for skewness and kurtosis were within recommended ranges (Kline, 2011) and thus indicate that assumptions of normality were met. In order to account for nonindependence in dyadic data and to examine intrapersonal (actor) and interpersonal (partner) effects, we analyzed actor-partner interdependence models (APIMs; Kenny et al., 2006) using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). If members of dyads are empirically distinguishable from one another, then all the parameters in the APIM can be freely estimated (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). To determine whether data from members of dyads are empirically distinguishable, Omnibus tests of distinguishability (I-SAT) can be used (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). I-SATs involve constraining the means, variances, actor covariances, and partner covariances to be equal between the members of the dyads; a significant chi-square statistic constitutes evidence for empirical distinguishability. Prior to testing APIMs, therefore, we ran a series I-SATs. There were no missing values in the sample, and the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator was employed for the analysis.

RESULTS

Correlations

The correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Trait mindfulness and relationship mindfulness were positively correlated in both male ($r = .72, p < .001$) and female ($r = .70, p < .001$) participants. Male and female relationship mindfulness had a significant positive association with self and partner positive relationship quality, and it had a significant negative association with self and partner negative relationship quality. For males and females, relationship mindfulness was negatively associated with self and partner psychological variables: depression and stress.

Actor-Partner Interdependence Model

An I-SAT model was tested and yielded statistically significant results, $\chi^2(54) = 570.40, p < .001$. Consequently, APIMs for distinguishable dyads were used which allowed all parameters to be freely estimated in each of the APIMs. Because models were fully saturated, the model was a perfect fit.

Table 2 presents results of the APIM involving the relationship outcome variables (i.e., positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality). For positive relationship quality, actor effects were statistically significant for both males ($\beta = .32, p < .001$) and females ($\beta = .40, p < .001$); that is, for both males and females, higher relationship mindfulness was linked with higher positive relationship quality. For females, the actor path from trait mindfulness to positive relationship quality was significant and in the opposite direction than expected ($\beta = -.23, p < .01$). It is important to note, however, that the zero-order correlations between trait mindfulness and positive relationship quality were significant in the expected direction. Because collinearity between female trait and relationship mindfulness was within acceptable limits (Tolerance $< .10$, VIF > 10), we estimated an additional APIM that did not include male or female relationship mindfulness to better understand the association between trait mindfulness and positive relationship quality. In this model, the path from female trait mindfulness to positive relationship quality was in the expected direction ($\beta = .20, p < .01$).

Returning to the results of the original APIM, two significant partner effects involving positive relationship quality were found; males with high relationship mindfulness were likely to have

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations among Model Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. M trait mind	–											
2. F trait mind	.56	–										
3. M Rel mind	.72	.51	–									
4. F Rel mind	.48	.70	.56	–								
5. M Pos Rel	.28	.25	.40	.37	–							
6. F Pos Rel	.24	.18	–.38	.38	.77	–						
7. M Neg Rel	–.35	–.35	–.54	–.51	–.51	–.50	–					
8. F Neg Rel	–.37	–.38	–.55	–.58	–.52	–.62	.73	–				
9. M stress	–.45	–.35	–.43	–.35	–.41	–.35	.37	.38	–			
10. F stress	–.42	.38	–.43	–.46	–.45	–.44	.35	.42	.55	–		
11. M depress	–.36	–.29	–.34	–.33	–.49	–.44	.40	.46	.63	.44	–	
12. F depress	–.29	–.40	–.33	–.36	–.49	–.49	.37	.47	.46	.70	.49	–
M	4.08	3.92	4.30	4.45	5.99	5.87	1.80	1.94	2.63	2.82	1.65	1.90
SD	1.20	1.20	1.20	1.11	1.13	1.28	1.27	1.39	.72	.70	1.12	.72

Note. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Table 2
Actor-Partner Interdependence Model Results for Trait Mindfulness, Relationship Mindfulness, Relationship Outcomes, and Psychological Outcomes

Variable	PRQ		NRQ		Stress		Depression	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Actor								
Relationship mindfulness	.32***	.40***	–.45***	–.46***	–.17*	–.16*	.08	–.10
Trait mindfulness ^a	–.03	–.23**	.11	.09	–.26**	–.23**	–.21*	–.26**
Partner								
Relationship mindfulness	.30***	.26***	–.39***	–.36***	–.14	–.10	–.14	–.19*
Trait mindfulness ^a	–.05	–.08	.08	.08	–.11	–.05	–.01	.00

Notes. All exogenous variables were correlated. PRQ = Positive relationship quality; NRQ = negative relationship quality. ^aThe actor-partner pattern of coefficients for trait mindfulness to PRQ and NRQ for males and females indicates the presence of a suppressor effect. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

female partners with high positive relationship quality ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), and females with higher relationship mindfulness tended to have male partners with increased positive relationship quality ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$). The model accounted for 19% of the variance in positive relationship quality in males and 21% of the variance in positive relationship quality in females.

Higher levels of relationship mindfulness were associated with lower levels of negative relationship quality in males ($\beta = -.45, p < .001$) and females ($\beta = -.46, p < .001$). Both partner effects were also significant. A significant negative association between female relationship mindfulness and male negative relationship quality was identified ($\beta = -.36, p < .001$); likewise, the partner path from male relationship mindfulness to female negative relationship quality was significant ($\beta = -.39, p < .001$). In contrast, the actor and partner paths from trait mindfulness to negative relationship quality were not statistically significant. The model accounted for 36% of the variance in negative relationship quality in males and 41% of the variance in negative relationship quality in females.

The results revealed that higher relationship mindfulness was significantly associated with lower perceived stress for both males ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$) and females ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$). Trait mindfulness was also negatively linked with perceived stress for males ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$) and females ($\beta = -.23, p < .01$). None of the partner paths reached statistical significance. Altogether, this model accounted for 25% of the variance in males' perceived stress and 29% of the variance in females' perceived stress.

For both male and female partners, relationship mindfulness was not significantly associated with own level of depression. On the other hand, trait mindfulness had a significant negative association associated with depression in males ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$) and females ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$). The only significant partner effect in this model was the negative association between female relationship mindfulness and male depression ($\beta = -.19, p < .05$). The model accounted for 18% of the variance in depression in males and 19% of the variance in depression in females.

DISCUSSION

In the present investigation, we examined the degree to which relationship mindfulness was linked with self and partner psychological functioning and relationship well-being while accounting for trait mindfulness. Consistent with the first hypothesis, all four actor paths from relationship mindfulness to the relationship variables (i.e., positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality) were statistically significant. These findings are consistent with the results of a previous study in which relationship mindfulness explained a significant amount of variance in key relationship outcomes, even when accounting for trait mindfulness (Kimmes et al., 2017). The present study extends these previous findings by demonstrating them in a sample of adults in long-term, committed relationships and did so using dyadic data to account for the interdependence between partners.

Although the first hypothesis did not involve examining the association between trait mindfulness and positive relationship quality, an unexpected association between these variables was found; namely, trait mindfulness had a negative association with positive relationship quality. Evidence of multicollinearity was not found. Furthermore, an additional APIM that did not include relationship mindfulness was estimated, and the results showed that the association between female trait mindfulness and positive relationship quality was positive. In fact, in this model, all of the associations among the variables were in the expected directions, even if the association was not statistically significant. Taken together, the results from the analyses signal the presence of a negative suppressor variable. Suppressor variables correlate with one or more predictor variables and explain some of the outcome-irrelevant variance in the predictors, improving the predictive power of the model (Pandey & Elliott, 2010; Tzelgov & Henik, 1991). Negative suppressors have a negative regression coefficient with the outcome variable when included as additional predictor variable, even though they have positive correlations with one or more predictor variables and with the outcome variable (Conger, 1974; Darlington, 1968; Maassen & Bakker, 2001). Based on the results from the original and follow-up analyses, it is reasonable to conclude that trait mindfulness acted as a negative suppressor variable in the original APIM and that higher trait mindfulness in females most likely associates increased positively relationship quality.

The second hypothesis involved testing whether own level of relationship mindfulness was inversely associated with partner level of negative relationship quality and positively associated with partner level of positive relationship quality. All four partner paths from relationship mindfulness to the relationship variables were significant; the results, therefore, are consistent with the

second hypothesis. The significant partner paths align with previous research showing that increases in certain facets of mindfulness are linked with partner relationship satisfaction (Khadouma, Gordon, & Strand, 2017). Our findings also largely align with the findings of an investigation that involved a sample of couples in which one partner had chronic pain; when partners without chronic pain had high scores on the acting with awareness subscale of the Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2008), they were more likely to be rated by their spouse as providing more emotional and instrumental support (Williams & Cano, 2014). On the other hand, the results of the present study were not consistent with those reported in a recent study that explored the link between one partner's trait mindfulness and the other partner's relationship anxiety and satisfaction; the researchers found that the association did not reach statistical significance (Iida & Shapiro, 2017). Additional studies that include dyadic data and measures of both trait and relationship mindfulness will contribute to document a clearer and more complete picture of the way in which mindfulness plays a role in romantic relationships.

The interpersonal associations between relationship mindfulness and relationship outcomes found in this study are consistent with the notion that the internal experience of mindfulness manifests itself in behavior toward one's romantic partner. For example, behaviors that contribute to positive relationship outcomes for the partner, such as acts of sacrifice, forgiveness, or giving support to one's partner may indicate a more mindful state. On the other hand, verbal aggression, retaliatory behaviors, or withdrawal behaviors that have a negative impact on relationship outcomes may reflect a less mindful state. However, it is important to note that behaviors were not directly assessed in this study, so future research is needed to elucidate the ways in which the tendency to be mindful during interactions with a romantic partner is expressed behaviorally. When one partner tends to be mindful in the relationship, this tendency is likely to be manifested by prorelationship behaviors through heightened awareness and ability to regulate automatic impulses (Karremans et al., 2017), which ultimately improves the other partner's evaluation of the relationship. On the other hand, less mindful individuals may act mindlessly in their relationships, which is likely to result in self-interested impulses or more retaliatory behaviors (Donald et al., 2018).

Some support was found for Hypothesis 3, which involved exploring whether relationship mindfulness was negatively associated with own perceived stress and depression. For both males and females, higher relationship mindfulness was linked with lower perceived stress; in contrast, the associations between relationship mindfulness and depression were not statistically significant. It is notable, however, that higher levels of trait mindfulness were associated with lower levels of perceived stress and depression. These findings are largely consistent with the literature linking trait mindfulness and psychological functioning (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2018). The current study extends this area of research by demonstrating relationship mindfulness is related to aspects of own psychological functioning, even when accounting for trait mindfulness.

We found partial support for the fourth hypothesis (i.e., one's relationship mindfulness will have significant negative associations with partner's depression and perceived stress). More specifically, when female partners reported being more mindful in the context of the romantic relationship, their male partners reported lower levels of depression. This provides some evidence that one partner's relationship mindfulness may play a role in the other partner's overall psychological well-being. Although an individual's ability to be mindful in romantic relationships may begin as an intrapersonal phenomenon, it may shape their behavior and patterns of communication in a way that that impacts their partner. As illustrated by prior research, the internal process of mindfulness manifests in observable behaviors (May & Reinhardt, 2018), ultimately having an impact on the other person in the relationship.

Limitations

The results of this study should be considered with several of its limitations in mind. First, because all of the variables in this study were assessed at a single time-point, the results cannot be used to make inferences about the temporal ordering or underlying cause-and-effect relationships among the variables that were studied. Second, all of the variables that were examined in this investigation, including trait and relationship mindfulness, were assessed using self-report. The potentially problematic aspects of self-report measures of mindfulness have been detailed in other works (See Van Dam et al., 2018 for review). Third, although two indicators of relationship well-being

and two indicators of psychological well-being were assessed in this study, we did not examine other key indicators of relationship health (e.g., closeness, partner support) and psychological health (e.g., self-esteem, positive affect).

Although not necessarily a limitation, another important factor to consider in interpreting the results of this study is way in which trait mindfulness and, by extension, relationship mindfulness were conceptualized and measured. The conceptualization of trait mindfulness used in this study involves present-focused awareness and attention, and this was measured using a five-item version of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003), which is undoubtedly one of the most popular measures of trait mindfulness. However, it is worth noting that this conceptualization and measurement of trait mindfulness does not specifically measure the degree to which one brings a nonjudgmental attitude to their conscious experience. Having a nonjudgmental orientation is a mental attribute that is frequently included in definitions and measures of trait mindfulness. In the context of romantic relationships, nonjudging could be factor that plays an important role, and this could be particularly true during conflict or when there is tension between partners. Incorporating the “nonjudgmental” component in the conceptualization and measurement of relationship mindfulness should be explored in future research.

Despite the limitations detailed above, this study also has several notable strengths, including the use of a sample of adult couples in committed relationships, the inclusion of a measure of trait mindfulness as well as a context-specific measure of mindfulness in the models, and the use of a statistical approach that accounts for interdependence between partners.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

Mindfulness interventions may be most effective when they target a specific context or domain (Papies, 2017). Romantic relationships are a unique and consequential context, and interventions that improve the tendency to be mindful across all contexts may not impact the tendency to be mindful with one’s romantic partner. The results of this study suggest that clinicians who use mindfulness-based interventions should consider what they want to accomplish when they select a specific intervention to use with an individual or couple. Is the intention to promote trait mindfulness or relationship mindfulness? Based on our findings, if a client’s goal involves improving their romantic relationship, then enhancing relationship mindfulness may be more useful in working toward that goal. It is reasonable to expect that interventions aimed at promoting relationship functioning would be most effective if the exercises are adapted to be most relevant to the domain that clients are seeking to address. Considering whether the objective of the mindfulness-based intervention is to promote trait mindfulness or relationship mindfulness can facilitate the process of selecting which mindfulness-based intervention to use.

It is reasonable to expect couple-level mindfulness practices to be particularly useful, relative to individual-level mindfulness practices, in enhancing positive relationship quality while reducing negative relationship quality. Couple-level mindfulness practices include loving-kindness meditation, eye gazing, and synchronized breathing, and these practices are used in existing mindfulness-based intervention for couples (e.g., Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Gambrel & Piercy, 2015). Focusing on the aforementioned couple-level mindfulness practices is potentially useful in encouraging partners to be mindful with each other. It is important to note that a recently developed meditation practice performed in dyads has been shown to promote closeness and self-disclosure (Kok & Singer, 2017). Interestingly, relative to training in classical, individually focused meditation, training in dyadic contemplative exercises resulted in less pronounced physiological reactions to social stress (Engert, Kok, Papassotiriou, Chrousos, & Singer, 2017). Although the results of the studies on dyadic meditation practice have been promising, it is important to note that the pairs of individuals used in studies of these contemplative dyadic practices were not romantic partners; they were participants who were paired together at random.

Considering the documented intrapersonal associations between relationship mindfulness and trait mindfulness with markers of psychological well-being, it is possible that both relationship- and individual-oriented meditation exercises may be useful in promoting psychological well-being. The finding that there were significant interpersonal associations between relationship mindfulness and dimensions of relationship well-being and psychological functioning reveals a number of new avenues through which clinicians may be able to use mindfulness-based interventions to facilitate

progress toward treatment goals. For example, encouraging relationship mindfulness in one partner may result in the other partner having a more favorable evaluation of the relationship. Likewise, this facilitation may also serve to reduce psychological distress.

Research that examines the similarities and differences among relationship mindfulness and trait mindfulness may help inform clinicians working to promote relational or psychological well-being. By furthering understanding of the associations that each type of mindfulness has with self and partner evaluations of psychological and relational well-being, clinicians may be better equipped to know what is more clinically relevant: (a) the degree to which romantic partners have the general tendency to be mindful or (b) the degree to which romantic partners tend to be mindful with each other. However, more research in this area is needed prior to making specific recommendations for clinical practice. Future research should test the associations among the variables in this study across time to determine their temporal order. In addition, the examination of variables potentially mediating the relationship between relationship mindfulness with psychological and relational well-being on the intra- and interpersonal level may help further explain their associations. Finally, researchers should consider exploring the potential differential impact of mindfulness-based interventions and exercises on relationship mindfulness and trait mindfulness.

CONCLUSION

The current study examined the associations between relationship mindfulness and own psychological and relationship functioning, as well as the interpersonal links among these variables. Our findings provide preliminary support that relationship mindfulness and trait mindfulness differ in terms of their intrapersonal and interpersonal associations with psychological and relational well-being. Overall, the findings suggest that the difference between trait mindfulness and relationship mindfulness is more than a conceptual one, and the contextual factors involving when and with whom one is mindful are consequential both intrapersonally and interpersonally. Relationship mindfulness, therefore, may be a relevant variable for clinical work with couples. Although further research involving relationship mindfulness is needed, the findings from this study demonstrate the need for such research.

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