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RELATIONAL MINDFULNESS AND APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: SENSE, DIRECT EXPERIENTIAL REFERENCE, AND THE PERFORMATIVE PRAXIS OF BEING-WITH

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Abstract: Contemporary mindfulness-based interventions have expanded widely across clinical, educational, and organizational contexts. However, their theoretical foundations have often remained anchored in individualistic and representational assumptions inherited from modern psychological paradigms. In parallel, Appreciative Inquiry has developed as a relational and generative methodology grounded in social constructionism, yet it has predominantly operated at the level of narrative meaning rather than lived experience. This article proposes an integrative framework that articulates relational mindfulness and Appreciative Inquiry through a bifactorial theory of meaning, distinguishing between sense and direct experiential reference—not as an abstract semantic taxonomy, but as an ontological tool for clarifying different modes of access to experience in relational practices. From this perspective, mindfulness is understood as a practice that cultivates access to direct experiential reference, while Appreciative Inquiry functions as a performative methodology capable of transforming such experiential moments into shared meanings, relational commitments, and coordinated futures. By revisiting the notions of peak experience and peak narrative, the article shows how experiential presence and relational inquiry can be integrated into a praxis of being-with, understood as an embodied, dialogical, and performative way of inhabiting shared worlds. This articulation offers a non-individualistic and non-internalist conception of mindfulness as a relational practice grounded in lived experience and joint action.

Keywords: relational mindfulness; appreciative inquiry; direct reference; peak experience; performativity; being-with.

Mindfulness and the Limits of Modern Psychological Individualism

The rapid expansion of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) has largely taken place within the conceptual horizons of modern psychology. While diverse in their applications, MBIs have frequently been formulated in ways that implicitly privilege the individual as the primary locus of experience, self-regulation, and change (Crane, 2017; Segal et al., 2013). This orientation does not necessarily entail internalism in every case—behaviorism, for example, was explicitly anti-internalist—but it does reflect a broader individualistic framing in which psychological processes are primarily attributed to discrete persons rather than to relational and contextual forms of life.

Within cognitive and cognitive-behavioral approaches, this individualism has often been accompanied by representational assumptions about the mind, understood as a system of internal processes mediating between stimulus and response. Although mindfulness was initially introduced as a practice oriented toward direct experience and embodied awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), its integration into cognitive frameworks has at times reinforced a focus on internal mental processes, even when such processes are explicitly decentered or observed.

This tension has motivated critical reflections within the field of mindfulness itself, not with the aim of rejecting these interventions, but of interrogating the epistemological and ontological assumptions that organize their understanding of experience, meaning, and action (Crane, 2017). The

issue, in this sense, does not lie in the clinical or educational use of mindfulness per se, but in the implicit images of the self and the mind that guide its theoretical and methodological translations.

From Individualism to a Relational Ontology

Social constructionism offers a decisive displacement of individualistic premises by situating meaning, identity, and action within relational processes (Gergen, 2009). From this perspective, psychological phenomena are not primarily located within individuals but emerge through joint action, linguistic practices, and shared forms of life. Importantly, this shift does not consist in replacing internalism with externalism; rather, it reformulates the problem by dissolving the internal–external dichotomy as an explanatory foundation.

Gergen's relational ontology challenges the modern image of the mind as a representational mirror of reality—an image that has shaped both behaviorist and cognitivist traditions, albeit in different ways. In dialogue with pragmatism and ordinary language philosophy, social constructionism emphasizes performativity: language does not merely describe the world but participates in the constitution of forms of life (Austin, 1962).

Within this framework, mindfulness can be reconceptualized not as an individual capacity exercised in isolation, but as a relational practice embodied in shared contexts of attention, listening, and presence. Recent formulations of relational mindfulness have emphasized this shift, understanding mindfulness as an embodied and dialogical practice grounded in shared attention and

relational presence rather than in individual introspection (Aristegui et al., 2021).

Sense, Reference, and Lived Experience

To rigorously articulate the integration between mindfulness and Appreciative Inquiry, it is useful to draw on a bifactorial theory of meaning that distinguishes between sense and reference (Putnam, 1975). This distinction is not introduced here as an external explanatory framework, but as a conceptual clarification that emerges from the analysis of lived experience and its relational articulation. Meaning cannot be reduced either to internal mental contents or solely to linguistic conventions; it involves both symbolic articulation and direct engagement with the world.

From a phenomenological perspective, lived experience precedes conceptualization and narration. Mindfulness practices cultivate sensitivity to this pre-reflective dimension, allowing practitioners to attend to embodied sensations, affective tones, and presence without immediately translating them into interpretive schemas (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). This experiential access corresponds to what can be described as direct experiential reference: contact with experience as it is lived, rather than as it is represented.

Narrative and symbolic meaning, by contrast, belongs to the domain of sense. It is indispensable for communication, reflection, and coordination, yet it becomes derivative when detached from its experiential anchoring. The challenge, therefore, is not to abandon narrative meaning, but to allow it to emerge congruently from lived experience rather than imposing prefabricated interpretive frameworks.

Peak Experience, Peak Narrative, and Appreciative Inquiry

The concept of peak experience refers to moments of intensified integration, vitality, and meaning in which individuals feel deeply connected to themselves, others, and the world (Maslow, 1964). While this notion was not originally formulated as a theory of reference, peak experiences clearly point to direct experiential contact rather than abstract cognition.

Appreciative Inquiry translates this intuition into a relational methodology by focusing on peak narratives: stories of moments in which individuals or organizations experienced vitality, effectiveness, and alignment (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Through collective inquiry, these narratives become resources for imagining and enacting preferred futures.

However, Appreciative Inquiry has typically operated at the level of narrative meaning, with the risk—not always explicitly thematized—of reabsorbing lived experience into retrospective and often optimizing accounts. The integration proposed here does not seek to correct this orientation but to expand it by explicitly incorporating a phenomenological anchoring that allows participants to re-enter, experientially, the lived conditions that made the peak moment possible (Gendlin, 1997).

Methodologically, this reconfiguration subtly transforms the central phases of Appreciative Inquiry. In the Discover phase, inquiry shifts from mere event reconstruction toward the reactivation of experiential qualities in the present. In the Dream phase, future possibilities are not only imagined but felt as emerging potentials rooted in current relational experience.

From Constative Description to Performative Praxis

This integration highlights a broader shift from constative to performative modes of engagement. Constative language describes what is; performative language participates in bringing something about (Austin, 1962). Appreciative Inquiry, understood performatively, creates conditions for the emergence of new forms of coordination, commitment, and joint action.

When situated within this performative framework, mindfulness ceases to be a private attentional technique and becomes a shared mode of presence that sustains relational transformation. The combination of mindfulness and Appreciative Inquiry thus enables a movement from individual awareness toward collective enactment, from observation toward participation.

This shift does not merely introduce new techniques; it implies a contextual transformation of the very mode of being. Drawing on the notion of being-with (Mitsein), mindfulness is resituated as a way of inhabiting shared worlds rather than as a retreat into interiority. Past experiences, present awareness, and future possibilities become intertwined in lived action rather than treated as separate domains.

Conclusion: Relational Mindfulness as a Praxis of Being-With

This article has argued that integrating relational mindfulness and Appreciative Inquiry requires more than a methodological juxtaposition: it entails a reorientation at the levels of meaning, reference, and ontology from which practice itself is understood. By

distinguishing between sense and direct experiential reference, mindfulness can be understood as access to lived experience, while Appreciative Inquiry offers a performative methodology for transforming such experience into shared meanings and coordinated futures.

This perspective does not seek to close the debate on mindfulness, but to open a space for its redescription as a situated relational praxis—one capable of informing not only individual interventions, but shared forms of presence, coordination, and ethical responsibility. In this sense, relational mindfulness does not constitute an additional technique, but a contextual transformation of the very mode of being-with others in practice.

Future work will elaborate the practical implications of this framework through the development of concrete relational mindfulness protocols and Appreciative Inquiry–based facilitation guidelines, extending the present theoretical articulation into applied domains.

Transparency Statement

The author used digital tools, including AI-based language assistance, for editorial and linguistic support during the preparation of this manuscript. The conceptual framework, argumentation, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

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