
Mindfulness, Perceived Partner Responsiveness, and Relational Conflict Among Emerging Adult Couples Plleine conscience, réceptivité perçue chez le partenaire et conflit relationnel chez les couples d'adultes émergents

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the ways in which perceived partner responsiveness can explain the link between trait mindfulness and conflicts among emerging adult couples. Members of a total of 127 mixed-gender couples completed a series of questionnaires. Mediation analyses revealed that, for men, mindfulness was associated with fewer and less intense relational conflicts and that this association was explained partially by perceived partner responsiveness. For women, partner responsiveness was also associated negatively with reported conflicts, but mindfulness was not related directly or indirectly to relational conflicts. Our results suggest that mindfulness and responsiveness can contribute to the understanding of relational conflicts among emerging adult mixed-gender couples. Implications for counselling and psychotherapy are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude analyse les façons dont la réceptivité perçue chez le partenaire permet d'expliquer le lien entre la pleine conscience dispositionnelle et les conflits chez les couples d'adultes émergents. Les membres de 127 couples hommes-femmes ont rempli une série de questionnaires. Les analyses de médiation ont révélé que, chez les hommes, la pleine conscience était associée à des conflits relationnels plus rares et moins intenses et que cette association s'expliquait partiellement par la réceptivité perçue chez le partenaire. Chez les femmes, la réceptivité du partenaire était aussi associée négativement avec des conflits rapportés, mais la pleine conscience n'était pas liée directement ou indirectement avec les conflits relationnels. Nos résultats

semblent indiquer que la pleine conscience et la réceptivité peuvent contribuer à la compréhension des conflits relationnels chez les couples d'adultes émergents hommes-femmes. Le tout est suivi d'une discussion des implications pour le counseling et la psychothérapie.

During emerging adulthood, individuals begin to explore romantic relationships in greater depth and to enter longer-term intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000). The importance individuals place on committed relationships and marriage increases (Willoughby et al., 2015), and being involved in a romantic relationship helps emerging adults anticipate a life path in which they are in committed family relationships (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007). With the pursuit of more serious dyadic relationships comes the need to cope with the challenges and conflicts that inevitably occur in committed romantic relationships. Therefore, it is important to understand the personal dispositions that help emerging adults handle such challenges.

Mindfulness is an important personal disposition during emerging adulthood. It is generally described as a state of complete awareness of the present moment, including sensations, emotions, thoughts, and the environment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Mishra, 2004). Being mindful involves not only being conscious of internal and external events but also experiencing these events in a non-judgmental manner. Trait mindfulness reflects the general level of mindfulness across situations and time, whereas state mindfulness refers to the extent to which one is experiencing mindfulness at any given moment.

Throughout this article, we focus on the trait perspective on mindfulness, considering that this predisposition is deemed to help emerging adults feel more secure and face the developmental challenges specific to this period of life (Peer & McAuslan, 2016). Our study examines whether trait mindfulness is linked to conflicts among emerging adult couples and the processes that could underlie such a link.

Research results converge to underscore the individual benefits of being mindful. Individuals showing greater trait mindfulness are known to present lower depression and anxiety symptoms, stress, and psychological distress while experiencing higher positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological adjustment (Baer et al., 2006; Carlson & Brown, 2005; Keng et al., 2011). Furthermore, mindfulness has been associated with a greater capacity to identify and tolerate negative emotions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Liu et al., 2013) and with a better ability to regulate emotions appropriately (Arch & Craske, 2006; Broderick, 2005; Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). Recognizing, tolerating, and regulating emotions effectively may have repercussions at the individual level but could also influence interpersonal functioning, particularly in romantic relationships.

On an interpersonal level, mindfulness has consistently been associated with positive relational outcomes in general and with relationship satisfaction in particular (Carson et al., 2004; Iida & Shapiro, 2017; Wachs & Cordova, 2007), even when controlling for length of relationship and time spent together (Barnes et al., 2007). When couples are assigned to a mindfulness-based relationship-enhancing intervention, those practising mindfulness more frequently experience greater relationship satisfaction, suggesting a possible dose-response effect (Carson et al., 2004).

Important to relationship satisfaction is how couples respond to conflictual situations. Conflicts give rise to many difficult emotions and can escalate when partners respond to negative behaviours by behaving negatively (Fincham, 2003). Such cycles of negative reciprocity can be broken when partners are more mindful, since mindfulness contributes to inhibiting reactivity to conflict (Brown et al., 2007). The awareness and the acceptance associated with being mindful of difficult emotions arising in conflicts result in lower emotional reactivity, thus facilitating positive communication (Barnes et al., 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007).

Furthermore, mindfulness promotes constructive and adaptive responses to stressful events and reduces impulsivity, habitual reactions, and withdrawal (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010; Peterson et al., 2009; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Hertz et al. (2015) also found that more mindful partners showed lower levels of cortisol during conflict discussion and lowered negative affect after such a discussion. This effect was mediated by attachment anxiety, suggesting that highly mindful partners rely on effective strategies to regulate their negative emotions and therefore are less distressed by conflict (Hertz et al., 2015). Consistent with these results, several studies have shown that mindfulness promotes forgiveness after an interpersonal conflict (Jeter & Brannon, 2017; Johns et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2013).

Mindfulness not only helps those who practise it to cope with difficult emotions but also promotes empathy. It is understood that paying attention to the present moment can lead to concern for and adjustment to one's partner (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Being mindful of one's emotional state is thought to facilitate the awareness of others' feelings as well. Moreover, being mindful means having greater mental flexibility, which in turn would benefit interpersonal relationships since it leads to greater acceptance of the partner holding different thoughts and emotions (Wachs & Cordova, 2007).

Indeed, mindfulness has been associated with greater acceptance of one's partner, relatedness, and closeness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carson et al., 2004; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Researchers have increasingly taken an interest in perceived partner responsiveness, described as "the perception of behaviours that communicate understanding, valuing, and caring for one's core self and/or for important personal needs and goals" (Bar-Kalifa et al., 2015, p. 590). Perceived partner

responsiveness encompasses empathy and acceptance and could explain the consistently observed connection between mindfulness and relationship outcomes.

A recent study by Adair et al. (2018), conducted on a sample of adults aged 18 to 73, revealed that individuals with high levels of trait mindfulness tend to perceive their partners as more responsive and consequently are more satisfied in their relationship. These results suggest that having an empathic partner and feeling accepted and appreciated contributes to positive aspects of the relationship.

It is particularly important to review and to understand the factors that favour healthy relational functioning during emerging adulthood. It is during this period of life that emerging adults are building the foundations on which their future relationship experiences will be based. Therefore, counsellors and psychotherapists working with emerging adults must gain a better understanding of the factors associated with conflict management among them. The present study aims to examine the mediational role of perceived partner responsiveness in the connection between mindfulness and couple conflicts among emerging adults. It is hypothesized that more mindful partners will report fewer conflicts and that this relationship will be explained partially by a more positive perception of partner responsiveness.

Method

Participants

In total, 135 mixed-gender couples came to the laboratory to complete a series of questionnaires. They were recruited with the use of social media and advertisements in locations frequented by emerging adults (e.g., apartment buildings for students, fitness centres, libraries, coffee shops) and via university classes. Respondents had to be in a romantic relationship for at least two months ($m = 2.44$ years, $SD = 2.15$) and be between 18 and 30 years old (women's mean age = 21.57 years, $SD = 2.67$; men's mean age = 22.74 years, $SD = 3.03$); 55% of the couples were dating but not living together, 41% were living together, and 4% were married. Most participants were full-time university or college students (75% of women and 41% of men) or occupied a full-time job (18% of women and 48% of men). Mean years of education was 15.47 ($SD = 2.31$) for women and 15.26 ($SD = 2.46$) for men. The median category of annual income was zero to \$9,999 for women and \$20,000 to \$29,000 for men.

Measures

Mindfulness

Trait mindfulness was measured by the 15-item Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Participants rated their agreement with items such as "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present" on a scale from 1 (*almost always*) to 6 (*almost never*). A higher score reflects a greater

level of trait mindfulness. In the current study, the Cronbach coefficients for this measure were 0.89 for men and 0.88 for women.

Relational Conflict

Relational conflict was measured with a 3-item scale adapted from De Smet et al. (2013). Items measured frequency of conflict (“How often do you and your partner have conflicts?”), frequency of conflict resolution (“How often do you and your partner find a solution to these conflicts?” [reversed item]), and intensity of conflict (“How intense are these conflicts?”). The first 2 items were answered on a 5-point scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*), whereas the 3rd item was responded to on a 5-point scale from 1 (*very severe*) to 5 (*very calm*). The higher the average score, the more conflicts are experienced in the relationship.

Receptiveness

The perception of partner receptiveness was measured by using a 3-item scale (Selcuk & Ong, 2013). These items (“How much does your partner care about you?,” “How much does your partner understand the way you feel about things?,” and “How much does your partner appreciate you?”) were answered on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). The higher the total score, the more the respondent perceived his or her partner as being receptive. The Cronbach coefficients from this sample were 0.63 for men and 0.67 for women, which are generally indicative of moderate reliability for measures with 10 items and more. Considering that Cronbach coefficients often underestimate true reliability in measures with fewer items (Hinton et al., 2004), corrected item-total correlations were also calculated. An item displaying a relationship above 0.3, with the overall total, is considered reliable (Hinton et al., 2004). In this study, all corrected item-total correlations ranged between 0.5 and 0.6 for women and between 0.4 and 0.6 for men.

Results

Eight multivariate outliers were identified using Mahalanobis distances and were removed in the subsequent analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Thus, analyses are based on a sample of 127 couples. Descriptive data and correlations between variables of interest are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Correlations between partners' variables of interest were computed and revealed that participants' mindfulness was not significantly correlated with responsiveness or conflicts as reported by their partners ($p > 0.05$ for all correlations).

Mediation analyses were done following Hayes's (2013) method and with men's and women's data separately to respect the assumption of independence of data. In each model, mindfulness was entered as the independent variable, perception of responsiveness as the mediating variable, and conflicts as the dependent

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Measured Variables, for Women and Men

Variables	Women					Men				
	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Socio-demographic variables										
Age	118	21.57	2.67	18	29	119	22.74	3.03	18	30
Years of education	115	15.47	2.31	11	22	117	15.26	2.46	10	23
Relationship length (in months)	119	29.24	25.85	2	120	119	29.24	25.85	2	120
Independent variable										
Mindfulness	113	4.04	0.85	1.67	5.87	115	3.89	0.89	1.60	6.00
Dependent variable										
Conflict	114	1.53	0.56	1.00	4.00	116	1.71	0.64	1.00	4.00
Mediation variable										
Perceived responsiveness	116	3.74	0.35	1.67	4.00	118	3.66	0.37	2.67	4.00

Table 2
Correlations Between Interest and Control Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	---	0.38**	0.61**	0.11	0.21*	-0.11	-0.02
Years of education	0.65**	---	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.04
Annual income	0.56**	0.43**	---	0.05	0.25**	-0.04	-0.04
Relationship length	0.23*	0.17	0.25**	---	0.01	0.01	-0.06
Mindfulness	-0.02	-0.10	0.16	-0.11	---	-0.32**	0.21*
Conflict	0.05	0.02	0.03	-0.01	0.03	---	-0.42**
Perceived responsiveness	0.06	0.00	0.05	0.07	-0.15	-0.53**	---

Note. Women's results are presented below the diagonal, while men's results are shown above the diagonal.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

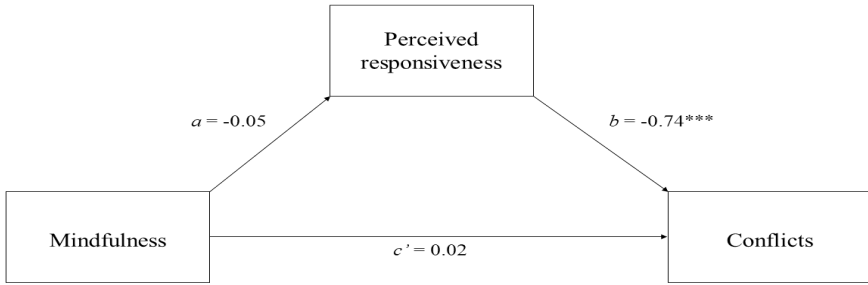
variable. Age, years of education, annual income, and relationship length were entered as covariates.

This procedure generated mediation coefficients for the path from the predictor to the mediator (path a), for the path from the mediator to the outcome while controlling for the predictor (path b), and for the direct effect of the predictor on the outcome controlling for the mediator (path c'). The presence of a mediation effect is supported when the indirect path between the independent variable and the dependent variable through the mediating variable (path ab) is significant. The proportion of explained variance for each mediation analysis serves as the effect size for the complete model.

Also, the standardized regression coefficients are presented in Figure 1 (for women) and Figure 2 (for men) and serve as effect sizes for individual links. Proportion of explained variance and standardized regression coefficients can be interpreted with Cohen's (1988) benchmarks (for proportions of explained variance, small = 2%, medium = 15%, and large = 25%; for standardized regression coefficients, small = 0.14, medium = 0.39, and large = 0.59).

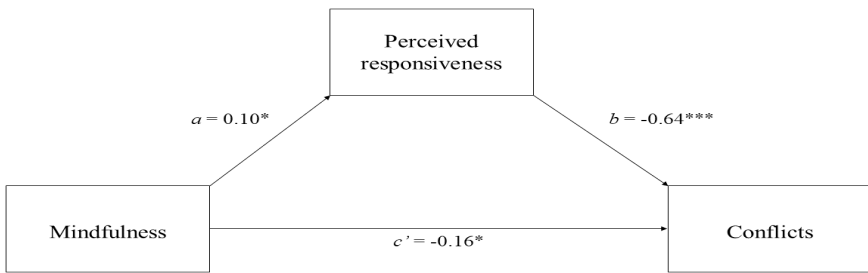
For women, the general model is significant, $F(6, 96) = 3.47$, $p < .01$, and explains 18% of the variance for conflicts. However, contrary to what was predicted, path a , $t(97) = -1.32$, $p = .19$, $[-0.13; 0.03]$, and path c' , $t(96) = -0.38$, $p = .71$, $[-0.15; 0.10]$, are not significant for women. The indirect effect (path ab) is therefore not significant, b ($BootSE$) = 0.04 (.03), $Boot95\%$ CI $[-0.01; 0.10]$. However, path b is significant, $t(96) = -4.41$, $p < .001$, $[-1.07; -0.41]$.

Figure 1
Simple Mediation Model of the Association Between Mindfulness and Conflicts for Women



Note. Standardized coefficients. Women’s age, years of education, annual income, and relationship duration were entered as covariates.
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 2
Simple Mediation Model of the Association Between Mindfulness and Conflicts for Men



Note. Standardized coefficients. Men’s age, years of education, annual income, and relationship duration were entered as covariates.
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

For men, the general model is significant, $F(6, 103) = 5.64, p < .001$, and explains 25% of the variance for conflicts. Paths a , $t(104) = 2.52, p < .05, [0.02; 0.19]$, and b , $t(103) = -4.27, p < .001 [-0.94; -0.34]$, are significant. The indirect effect is significant (path ab), b ($BootSE$) = $-0.07 (.03)$, $Boot95\% CI [-0.15; -0.02]$. In other words, men who are higher in trait mindfulness tend to perceive their partner as more receptive, which is linked with less conflict in the couple. Relation c' also revealed to be significant, $t(103) = -2.42, p < .05, [-0.29; -0.03]$: for men, being more mindful is directly associated with fewer conflicts.

Discussion

Emerging adulthood is a transitory period of life during which most emerging adults begin to explore romantic relationships in greater depth and enter into more invested relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the contribution of perceived partner responsiveness in the relationship between mindfulness and conflict among couples during this particular life period. First, consistent with our hypothesis, we found that the more mindful the young men reported being, the fewer conflicts they reported in their relationship. Their greater perceived partner responsiveness partially explained this connection. These findings suggest that demonstrating trait mindfulness may help young men recognize their partners as more responsive, which, together with mindfulness, would help them deal with conflictual situations.

Second, we found that young women who perceived greater partner responsiveness also reported less conflict in their relationship. However, their level of mindfulness was not directly associated with either perceived partner responsiveness or relational conflicts. This latter finding does not support our hypothesis that partner responsiveness would partially mediate the relationship between mindfulness and relational conflicts. Nevertheless, it reveals that young women's perception of their partners' responsiveness is also important in conflict management.

Taken together, our results lend support to the idea that perceived responsiveness from one's partner can help understand romantic relationship dynamics. Both young men and young women reported less conflict when they perceived greater partner responsiveness. Bar-Kalifa et al. (2015) described the sequence of responsive interaction as follows. First, it begins when one partner elicits responsiveness by expressing a core aspect of themselves. The partner then has the opportunity to act responsively. When successful, the interaction will progress with the recipient perceiving this responsiveness. It is when this sequence is complete that perceived partner responsiveness can influence both partners' outcomes (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Clark, 2013). This process appears to be relevant for the conflict management of both men and women during emerging adulthood. More specifically, for men, this interaction sequence seems to be easier to set in motion and to complete when they demonstrate a greater ability to be mindful.

Overall, the results for young men are consistent with the literature on mindfulness and responsiveness. Previous studies have revealed that being mindful allows individuals to regulate emotions and to decrease stress response to relationship conflict, to approach problems and conflicts in a more constructive way, and to demonstrate greater acceptance (Barnes et al., 2007; Carson et al., 2004; Laurent et al., 2016). Adair et al.'s (2018) study on adults of all ages also indicated that individuals high in trait mindfulness tend to perceive their partners as more responsive and that this is one factor making them more satisfied in their relationship. Our results add to this literature by documenting that young men who are more mindful tend to perceive more responsiveness from their partner and to report less conflict. Results obtained for both men and women add to the current knowledge on perceived partner responsiveness, a variable that is gaining interest in relationship research. In light of our results, we can conclude that perceiving a partner as responsive, and thus feeling supported and validated, can help reduce conflict among emerging adult couples.

The different results obtained for men and women regarding the role of mindfulness for perceived responsiveness and conflicts are somewhat puzzling. However, other researchers have likewise found diverging patterns of results for men and women in similar contexts. For instance, Gadassi et al.'s (2016) study revealed that responsiveness is not always influenced in the same way for men and women. Their research showed that, daily, the link between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction is mediated partially by perceived partner responsiveness. A stronger mediation was found for women and was explained by a stronger connection between sexual satisfaction and perceived partner responsiveness for women than for men. These results suggest that men and women do not necessarily base their judgment of their partner's level of responsiveness on the same factors or are not influenced to the same extent by specific factors.

Limitations

This study was not without its limitations. The study's cross-sectional design does not lead to a conclusion about causality and the directionality of the observed relationships. The sample was composed of emerging adults who were all in heterosexual relationships and living in Canada, thus limiting the generalizability of our results. Also, the size of the sample lent enough power to test the hypothesized mediation models for men and women separately, but not to test an Actor-partner mediation model (APIMeM) that would have considered partner effects. Even though we believe that our results contribute to research on mindfulness and emerging adulthood by providing some basic evidence for actor effects, these will need to be replicated and substantiated in future research. Larger samples will allow testing models combining actor and partner effects. Finally, our study enables us only to speculate on the reasons that could explain the divergent results for men and women. Future studies could examine other

determinants of partner responsiveness in the hopes of understanding which other personal characteristics influence it.

Counselling Implications

In brief, our results suggest that mindfulness and responsiveness are important in understanding relational conflicts among emerging adult couples. Knowing that conflict management is an important competence for couples, counsellors and psychotherapists working with emerging adults could help them be more responsive, empathetic, and validating, while also being able to perceive the signs of responsiveness expressed by their partner. Interventions could also teach partners—men in particular—to be more conscious of what is going on in the present moment, without being preoccupied with outside elements or past situations.

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