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Philippine Chachignon, Emmanuelle Le Barbenchon, Lionel Dany

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Mindfulness research and applications in the context of neoliberalism: A narrative and critical review

Philippine Chachignon | **Emmanuelle Le Barbenchon** | **Lionel Dany**

LPS, Aix Marseille University, Aix-en-Provence, France

Correspondence
Philippine Chachignon, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale, Maison de la Recherche. 29 avenue Robert Schuman, 13621 Aix-en-Provence, France.
Email: philippine.chachignon@univ-amu.fr

Abstract

This narrative and critical review outlines the implications of scientific production on Mindfulness and the widespread diffusion of the practice under neoliberal capitalism. This scientific, therapeutic and economic high-value object is a fruitful research field in medical and social sciences. Since exiting the confines of mental and somatic health it has also flourished as a self-care and self-improvement technique. Drawing on a psychosocial perspective where Mindfulness is considered both a psychological and a social phenomenon, we explore the reasons why institutions and corporations have regularly considered Mindfulness as the universal panacea to address mental health, social and environmental problems, and how this contributed to transferring the consequences of structural and systemic issues from the State to the realms of individual management and responsibilization, and fostering social inequalities. We expose the role of Buddhist Modernism, psychology and social psychology into the consolidation of Mindfulness as a product of knowledge and a form of governmentality. The effects on Mindfulness users and researchers of a mainstream neoliberal psychological science, including social psychology, are discussed. Avenues for mindful resistance, such as

This review aims to outline the links between research in contemporary Mindfulness and its applications under neoliberalism, and particularly in the fields of medical and psychological sciences.

theoretical and methodological perspectives for a critical social psychology of Mindfulness, are developed.

KEYWORDS
mindfulness meditation, neoliberal governmentality, psychologization, buddhist modernism, individual responsibilization, social inequalities, critical social psychology

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the most hyped mental development practices of the moment, Mindfulness is virtually everywhere, infiltrating daily lives at both a professional and private level equally. It can be found on streaming platforms, within the advertising industry and in organizations such as the Military, amongst environmental activists, in prisons, schools and hospitals (Walsh, 2018). Yet Mindfulness meditation or Mindfulness, is no less than 2500 years old. Originally, the translation of Mindfulness was rooted in the concept of memory, or the act of keeping something in mind (Bhikkhu, 2007). In "the Pali Canon of the Buddha [Mindfulness] is the element of watchfulness, the lucid awareness of each event that presents itself on the successive occasions of experience" (Bodhi, 2011, p. 21) that is cultivated during meditation. So how did this ancient practice transition into today's scientific and mainstream phenomenon, experiencing exponential research growth (see Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021) and evolving into a multibillion-dollar industry (Berthon & Pitt, 2019) within recent decades? Whilst Mindfulness is acclaimed for its effects on physical and mental health (for meta-analyses, see Grossman et al., 2004; Khoury et al., 2015), many authors with backgrounds in economic, educational and social sciences (e.g., Carvalho & Grácio, 2022; Forbes, 2017, 2022; Purser, 2021; Reveley, 2016; Walsh, 2016) have written about Corporate Mindfulness and Mindfulness in education as ways of perpetuating and promoting a neoliberal agenda unveiling its relationship with a profit-driven logic. However, social psychologists especially have been less vocal on the matter and its impact on individuals and groups, while they can enrich the psychology of Mindfulness with a contextual, social and societal perspective. The first objective of this review is to provide a narrative overview of the ongoing integration of Mindfulness into the neoliberal framework, highlighting the instrumental role Mindfulness has played in this context up to the present day. The second objective is to examine the way social psychology studies Mindfulness and can offer critical perspectives along with future directions.

2 | MINDFULNESS INTEGRATION INTO A SCIENTIFIC AND NEOLIBERAL LANDSCAPE

In the late 70s, American Professor of Medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn designed a laic, secularized and westernized version of Mindfulness that he successfully introduced in the scientific medical milieu to help patients deal with stress and physical pain (i.e., Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction or MBSR). Along with the uncovering of its processes (e.g. Hölzel et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006), Mindfulness has grown to be a highly debated object regarding the secularization process it has undergone.

2.1 | The secularization and westernization of mindfulness

Mindfulness early advocates, while resorting to a concept from Eastern spirituality, provided in the meantime a rhetoric of secularization and universality to promote the spreading of Mindfulness without contradicting the belief systems of the West. They "presented [it] as a value free practice with universal benefits" (Walsh, 2016, p. 154) to

make it easier to penetrate the scientific medical field, a universality that neurosciences would contribute to legitimize a couple decades later.

2.1.1 | The influence of Buddhist Modernism on contemporary mindfulness

In reality, secularizing Mindfulness did not require a full transformation of its philosophical principles. Historically, in contrast to traditional Buddhism which revolves around other-worldly concerns, non-clinging and self-transcendence, contemporary Buddhism and Mindfulness techniques tend to result in self-enhancement and the cultivation of present-centeredness. Farias et al. (2021) illuminate a significant shift that Buddhism has undergone since the 19th century, in the wake of Eastern colonization and its encounter with modernity and Christianity. Contemporary Buddhism has become a "scientific religion", as McMahan (2008) puts it, with its representations promoting the idea of compatibility with psychological science and reliance on individual experience. These representations may explain why some scientists have been able to ascribe therapeutic properties to Mindfulness or Mindfulness meditation. However, in Buddhist traditions, therapeutic aspects were not central, and neither was meditation; instead, the focus was on spiritual rituals. It was indeed the encounter with the West that generated this particularity and the detachment of Mindfulness meditation from a set of practices aimed at transcending the self, such as the Buddhist community, which is an important dimension of the practice (McMahan, 2008). By detaching Mindfulness meditation from its spiritual origins, the social dimensions of these practices have also been excluded, resulting in a meditation practice exclusively focused on and studied in relation to the self, in a postmodern age that Campbell (1999) identified as the Easternization of the West and that gave the primacy of self-deification over salvation.

Buddhist Modernism also nurtured the belief in a romantically idealized pacifist spirituality with the potential to address a wide range of contemporary societal challenges, such as war or environmental destruction (McMahan, 2008). These beliefs may also have influenced the ongoing instrumentalization of Mindfulness for tackling new societal issues. An empirical study (Rahmani et al., 2023) revealed three prominent themes related to the belief in the transformative powers of Mindfulness: improving interpersonal interactions, reducing violence and fostering peace, and connecting with one's inner self to guide individual actions. Despite the fact that, as per Thompson (2020), Buddhist Modernism not only failed to resolve the aforementioned issues but also contributed to their aggravation, these themes are supported by very current ideological concepts such as expressive individualism (Rahmani et al., 2023), aligning with the neoliberal notion that personal transformation alone can lead to broader social and societal transformation.

2.1.2 | The assimilation of mindfulness into the neoliberal framework

The more recent assimilation of Eastern Buddhist Mindfulness into the Western modern form coincides with the dawning of neoliberalism, "the ideology behind the most recent stage in the development of capitalist society" (Thorsen & Lie, 2006), that was living its defining moments in most Western countries in the late 70s (Harvey, 2007). The integration and incorporation of Mindfulness at a societal and psychosocial level was eased by this dominant ideology, which is a social and political rationality based on free market economic policies and privatization. Under economic imperatives, both the institutions, including the State, and the individuals have to construe themselves as entrepreneurs and consumers who have the moral responsibility to self-care and self-optimize (Brown, 2006; Rottenberg, 2014). Neoliberalism is a form of governmentality concerned with "governing individuals indirectly and at a distance, through their own free will, and pursuit of their own interests" (Inoue, 2007, p. 81). In Mindfulness-based protocols, in order to grow Mindfulness skills, a "strong commitment to working on yourself and enough self-discipline to persevere in the process are essential to developing a strong meditation practice and a high degree of Mindfulness" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 83). Indeed, such an "inner technology" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), otherwise labelled "technology of

the self" in the French Theory (see Foucault, 1988), promoting self-management skills (Reveley, 2016) met the conditions for its development in a very favorable context.

Social psychologists Adams and al (2019) conceptualize neoliberalism as the assemblage of 4 main features, namely radical abstraction from context, entrepreneurial self, growth imperative and affect management, which are all hallmarks for personal and professional success. We propose to draw upon this conceptualization to forge novel connections between Mindfulness processes and applications, and neoliberalism. First, Mindfulness is the archetypal affect management practice. It enhances the constitution of special individual skills to overcome stress and an array of mental disorders via emotional and attentional regulation processes, decentering, acceptance of hardships and aches without judgment or reactivity, and cognitive flexibility. Second, Mindfulness involves an abstraction from context. It addresses stress issues at an individual and self-centered level, while preventing practitioners from being mindful of the external and systemic conditions that contributed to it in the first place (Walsh, 2018). The core rhetoric is that changing oneself first, and independently of the social conditions of the individual, can lead to changes in the society, and not the other way around (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Wrenn, 2022 (2022, p. 160) argues that with the sacralization of present-moment centeredness in Mindfulness, "the study and criticism of institutional context and the historical record are minimized and political dissent is hushed". Third, in this neoliberal governmentality, the Mindfulness movement operates as an incentive to develop the entrepreneurial self which "marks a tendency to develop oneself as a product or brand in response to demands of the social and economic marketplace" (Gershon, 2011, in Adams et al., 2019, p. 194). Mindfulness protocols are primarily designed to modern mental afflictions such as stress, anxiety or depression, that have organizational consequences due to reduced productivity and increased burnouts if unaddressed (Murphy et al., 2007). Lastly, while they convey focus on emotional, cognitive and spiritual development, Mindfulness protocols and individual practices foster adhesion to growth and health imperatives (i.e., freedom, self-expansion, fulfillment and pursuit of happiness). Indeed, in neoliberalism, "happy selves are those that are on the move, physically and psychologically. Being well in neoliberal systems requires selves that are fluid, changing, and growing" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 195). The modern mindful and flexible self is a relevant ethos for such demands. This ethos resonates with the facilitation of personal and professional achievements representing the most highly valued forms of motivation in neoliberal society, where psychologization, marketization and responsibilization of the self are key aspects.

2.2 | The all-psychologization era

The strong emphasis on personal agency, resilience, internality and self-diagnosis encourages a neoliberal shift towards "psychometricity" and "therapeutic hegemony" (Rimke, 2018, 2020). Mindfulness benefits on mental, physical, cognitive or affective health outcomes are extensively disseminated by the press, propelling the growing popularity of its therapeutic or self-care applications in daily lives as a preferred approach to addressing psychological difficulties. While Van Dam et al. (2018) point out a general lack of research on adverse events, Farias et al. (2020)'s systematic review suggests there is a high prevalence (8.3%) of adverse events in Meditation practices and Meditation-based therapies. The relative lack of attention towards these negative occurrences stems from the persistent scientific assumption that Mindfulness is universally beneficial. We posit that market logics, including marketization of the self, have stimulated the recent surge in (profitable) Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) (Creswell, 2017).

2.2.1 | The market forces behind the popularity of mindfulness

Some scholars and authors (see Doran, 2017; Hari, 2023) support the thesis that the digital upturn of the last 2 decades generated a series of attentional ills and that Mindfulness should, once again, be called in to help (Pedersen et al., 2021). In fact, as far as "the combined forces of the market and capitalism set out to extend the horizons of

enclosure and marketization to the intimate realms of our attention" (Doran, 2018, p. 31), the alleged loss of attentional capacities is a systemic problem that capitalism considers from an individual viewpoint and wishes to address through individual solutions for economic reasons. According to Berthon and Pitt (2019), the ongoing craze for Mindfulness in an attention economy lies in its potential to remedy "cognitive ills", from the archetypal attentional disorder ADHD to burnout. Given that clinical research has proven that Mindfulness could bring relief to these modern afflictions (see Fendel et al., 2021; Oliva et al., 2021), curing the systemic causes (such as the entertainment media, advertisement, social networking, switching and multi-tasking to achieve job demands) in a digital world where attention is commodified (Hari, 2023) is too much of a system threatening project to be a realistic one.

Reveley (2013, p. 539) conceptualizes this phenomenon as "cognitive capitalism" born with the Digital Revolution, where merchant value is derived from creative, innovative and healthy bright brains at work. The scientific and commercial success of 2 flagships of the Mindfulness programs, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (to treat depression) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, is consistent with the coming of the all-psychological era, whose ambition was to comprehensively address, along with Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies and Positive Psychology, all behaviors or cognitive patterns that would not fit within the market and workplace structures. Surely, on a strictly individual level, these programs and therapies *do* provide some relief thanks to regulation and detachment processes. However, as bodily practices, they also embody neoliberal inner workings. In this governmentality of biopower, "the power of the sovereign is mutating to disciplinary power [...] on to the human body and its usefulness for the productive mechanisms of the society" (Kronqvist, 2013, p. 28). As a matter of fact, control and self-control were to represent the key concern for psychology and social psychology under neoliberal responsibilization (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017).

Indeed, the worldwide neoliberal implementation of Mindfulness protocols was eased by its interweaving within an array of psychological methodologies and models. Arguing that psychologization of Mindfulness was one of the key underpinnings for its secularization, Stanley (2012) outlines how the scientific literature on Mindfulness became obsessed with clarifying, defining and operationalizing Mindfulness (e.g., as a trait, a state, a practice) as well as competing in the development of psychometric scales (see Bergomi et al., 2013). Yielding evidence of which variables Mindfulness affects and how (i.e., mainly looking for beneficial effects) allows the prediction and control of human behaviors. In research on human psychology, positivism implies that all social, historical, cultural and ideological information is removed from the reflection on the production of science (Teo, 2018). This has material consequences in the real world.

2.2.2 | The individual responsibilization and the perpetuation of inequalities

Actually, the application of Mindfulness in 2 life spheres are considered particularly problematic from critical and ethical perspectives. On one hand, Reveley (2016) points out how Mindfulness adds to the medicalization of education, psychologizing and responsibilizing the individuals, especially young people. Zhang et al. (2021, p. 8) showed that "recent systematic reviews found MBIs hold promises in particular in improving resilience to stress, cognitive performance such as attention, and emotional problems in children and youths". Clearly, the willingly hidden speech behind the resilience argument is that the system is unfair and produces psychological disorders that the individuals have to deal with on their own without questioning what is causing them, hence without challenging the status quo. On the other hand, Corporate Mindfulness, also known as "McMindfulness" or Mindfulness in the workplace, has been broadly debated within academic settings (see Purser, 2021; Walsh, 2016) because "programs like Google's *Search Inside Your-self* produce neoliberal subjects, based on the core assumption that individuals are the locus of responsibility and change" (Walsh, 2018, p. 5). Workers are invited to join those programs because the psychological science has proven that trait mindfulness and MBIs are positively associated with adaptive job outcomes such as well-being, confidence, job satisfaction, performance and interpersonal relations (Zhang et al., 2021).

As a therapeutic Swiss army knife and a personal development instrument, "compressed into its ultimate functional form of pure secular stillness and its associated benefits of calming the mind, relieving stress, and attaining an overall state of health and well-being" (Arat, 2017, p. 171), Mindfulness is today encapsulated in what Fisher (2007) labels "medical neoliberalism". Healthcare is another product of consumption, submitted to what the consumers are led to think as free choice. "Potential dangers of this consumerist mode of fragmentation are new perceptions of disability and the rise of "technoluxe" and transhumanist models of medicine in which the focus is no longer on health per se but on enhancement of the body" (Fisher, 2007, p. 4). Considering the ubiquity of Mindfulness for self-optimization, and that it is a privilege of white educated upper-class females (see Olano et al., 2015) who do have a choice, needless to say that Mindfulness fuels the perpetuation and generation of systemic inequalities. Moreover, Purser and Milillo (2015, p. 16) declare: "Mindfulness training has wide appeal because it can be utilized as a method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the corporate status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on corporate goals." Systemic inequalities persist or are reinforced in this context as economic power and capital growth depend on workers' self-questioning about their productivity, all the while creating the collective illusion that inequalities are diminishing because the company treats them with ostensibly relaxing methods.

Eventually, while the individual is responsible for his self-care and is firmly invited to look for happiness, independently of the contextual or situational forces that co-determine his actions, this individual accountability "reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency" (Brown, 2003, p. 6). Modern Mindfulness can be situated in broader neoliberal trends that may undermine political citizenship, such as the popular concepts of resilience and recovery. These forms of individualization are embedded in neoliberal politics (Harper & Speed, 2014; Joseph, 2013) as they emphasize and highly value an individual's adaptability in a world characterized by uncertainty (e.g., violence, unemployment, pandemics, climate change) without addressing the need for social change. Indeed, in the same way that the GAFAM instrumentalize Mindfulness to promote employee resilience without questioning work conditions, the prevailing narratives of recovery and resilience in mental health foster the belief that anyone can draw upon their personal strengths to overcome adversity. Meanwhile, the underlying normativity of these concepts remains unquestioned (see Thorén & Olsson, 2018). The individualization of unemployment is also consistent with this framework and has the consequence of undermining collective values of solidarity and social struggles (Hobbins, 2016). It is the political, collective and social self that neoliberalism is threatening because it erodes social cohesion (Becker et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2017). Hence, one can wonder how social psychology, that consists in understanding how social agents navigate within these social, political and ideological environments, addresses the research in Mindfulness in the light of these critical considerations. Thus, the following part of this review will focus on the conceptual, epistemological and methodological choices of the social psychology of Mindfulness.

3 | A CRITICAL APPROACH TO (NON-CRITICAL) SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF MINDFULNESS

From the perspective of the sociology of science, Karremans and Papies (2017) explain that Mindfulness has been the preserve of clinical psychology and neurosciences for several decades, because of its medical and clinical applications embedded in a nosologic framework, with research protocols on its effectiveness on various mental conditions. Hence social psychologists' recent interest in Mindfulness, neglected until it had fully penetrated the routine practices and semantic universes of the general population. Just as Kabat-Zinn (2009) stated, the meditative practice is particularly relevant in people's daily lives, thus offering a fruitful research field for a discipline concerned with human behavior (Lindesmith et al., 1999). Since Mindfulness operates through nonjudgmentalness, de-automatization and shift in perspective (Shapiro et al., 2006), social psychology started to focus on Mindfulness and its association with self-related processes, behaviors, interpersonal and intergroup relations (Karremans & Papies, 2017).

3.1 | The neoliberal lens on mindfulness

The rising popularity of Mindfulness in the past decade sparked scientific heed from the part of mainstream (therefore dominant) behavioral social psychology. In this ontological paradigm, people are considered to have ill-adapted cognitions and behaviors that need to be addressed (Krueger & Funder, 2004). Prioritizing the cognitive remediation and rehabilitation of individuals over structural and systemic transformation is one central feature of neoliberalism. Some systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate a low level of evidence supporting the improvement of stress and mental health-related quality of life through Mindfulness programs, including attention (Goyal et al., 2014), or specific aspects of prosociality such as connectedness, aggression or prejudice (Kreplin et al., 2018), along with methodological biases, and conceptual and theoretical shortcomings in the studies on Mindfulness. This underscores the problematic instrumentalization of Mindfulness when lacking empirical consensus, and demonstrates that the widespread enthusiasm has sometimes overshadowed the scientific expertise regarding its automatic integration into professional and educational contexts that encourage these presumed beneficial effects. Mindfulness is caught in this epistemic frame because it was called, this time by mainstream social psychology, to address some contemporary social ills, mostly from an individual standpoint, thus maintaining and reproducing the existing structures.

3.1.1 | The social psychology of mindfulness

From a critical vantage point, it is heuristic to observe the concepts and objects that social psychology associates with Mindfulness, whether it be a psychological state, disposition, or a practice. First, a large body of work in the social psychology of Mindfulness is concerned with its effects on social issues. Despite the warnings contained in the aforementioned meta-analyses, more recent ones demonstrate that Mindfulness can reduce intergroup bias (e.g., Oyler et al., 2022), promote compassion and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Berry et al., 2020) or enhance health behaviors (e.g., Sala et al., 2020). At individual and group levels, these Mindfulness-related phenomena inscribe in a set of moral or ethical virtues that cannot be disputed from philosophical and Buddhist standpoints. However, because it does not overtly challenge the power structures at institutional and systemic levels (e.g., patriarchy, racism, colonialism, heterosexism), one can wonder to what extent does this contribute efficiently to foster social justice.

Furthermore, another particularly vigorous strand of research focuses on the relationship between Mindfulness and consumer behavior, such as sustainable behavior and consumption, pro-environmental behavior or financial well-being, up to the point that some authors (see Bahl et al., 2016) envision the "transformative potential of Mindfulness" to address unsustainable and unhealthy patterns of consumption. The rhetoric is that Mindfulness, via de-automatization, the observer position, or acting with awareness and consciousness (Hirst, 2003), can provide the consumer the cognitive space they need to make choices and, in the end, solve mindless consumption and the materialistic culture (Gupta et al., 2023). Under neoliberal capitalism, the responsibility to solve societal problems, including environmental issues, is transferred from governments to private consumers. Complacent with capitalist interests and concentrated on economic growth, the institutions' "focus on consumer choice and market-based solutions makes perfect neoliberal and political sense" (Isenhour, 2010, p. 456) although critics highlight this illusory consumer free choice or rationalizing lifestyle as only capable of bringing about limited change (Hobson, 2002).

Additionally, a broad corpus is dedicated to the study of "Social Mindfulness", defined as a kind of decision-making that is based on the mindful consideration of others before/while making a choice (Van Lange & Van Doesum, 2015). A methodological paradigm of the same name has been developed. This social psychology of Mindfulness is, as well, based on the rationale of choice and micro-social phenomena. Such a behavioral, interpersonal approach is quintessential of mainstream social psychology (Oishi et al., 2009), in this case blind to research design implications (studies are developed in labs with convenience samples) and to the macro-social context, which go unexplored and unchallenged. This epistemology matches the neoliberal feature of abstraction from context and its many implications at a systemic level, and participates in shaping a consumer-based anthropology of the self. The study of this form of

altruism draws on a reductionist vision of interpersonal relationships, because the explanation of reality stands on dispositional or situational factors, whereas in social constructionism, it would stand on the representations of reality (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002), as suggested in the psychosocial perspective (see Moscovici, 1984).

Finally, the concepts of self and identity, which are among social psychology's most fundamental and important research fields, have been widely investigated within the prism of Mindfulness' effects on self-related processes, including self-regulation and emotional regulation, assertiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy or self-monitoring (e.g., Britton et al., 2021). While research on Mindfulness and identities lacks a systematic review, last decade's literature has seen the emergence of studies on this relationship, in the context of adapting to institutional or organizational demands, and focusing on professional or academic identity (e.g., Adarves-Yorno et al., 2020; Atkins & Styles, 2015; Galles et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2017). Under neoliberalism, neoliberal identity can undermine the constitution of a social and collective identity. Indeed, as Wrenn (2014, p. 506) puts it, "neoliberal man is accountable only to himself for no matter what he does, in serving his best interests he serves the common good [...] and shares an identity with no greater group than that of other individuals working within their own isolation". These processes that Mindfulness can bolster are likely to fall under the "Commodification of Self-Identity" that McDonald et al. (2017) describe as the transformation of the self in another commodity that needs to be competitive on different market places. We therefore assert that social psychology contributes to the promotion of neoliberal identities, because research remains entangled in power relations and that commodification of health and self is regarded as a new form of social control (Esposito & Perez, 2014).

3.1.2 | Uncovering the dominant epistemology

Thus, due to the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism, these modes of subjectivity influence academics, including researchers in social psychology, personally and collectively, who, in turn, nurture the production of knowledge based on conceptual and methodological individualism and positivism (Bettache & Chiu, 2019; Gjorgjioska & Tomicic, 2019; Keast, 2020). Inasmuch as most research in social psychology of Mindfulness remains focused on intra-individual and interpersonal outcomes given its potential beneficial effects (e.g., Davis & Hayes, 2011), mainstream social psychology and clinical psychology tend to overlap. While it pathologizes the self and different kinds of relationships, this predominant *psychological* social psychology is prone to psychological reductionism (Webster, 1973) through the normalization of the use of Mindfulness with individuals who do not present any particular difficulties. Additionally, mainstream social psychology of Mindfulness is tied to methodological individualism, which explains social phenomena (when it does) by the behaviors and actions of individuals (Neck, 2021). The predominant presence of methodological individualism in social sciences is critiqued for its tendency to reduce human behavior to market logics and to simplify society as the mere aggregation of predictably rational behaviors (see Neck, 2021). This historically neoliberal-inspired epistemology (Oak, 2015) dismisses macrosocial explanations such as socio-historical and political contexts, whereas it should be the specialty and prerogative of social sciences to work with such contextual data. For instance, showing that there are environmental issues because individuals make mindless consuming choices falls under methodological individualism and contributes maintaining and reproducing a *psychological* social psychology. In this last section, therefore, we try to provide various avenues to illustrate how Mindfulness can be investigated from a critical social psychological viewpoint and bring in a methodological holism that considers the influence of power structures and institutions.

3.2 | Avenues for mindful resistance

To practice a social psychology of Mindfulness that is reflexive, scholars may need to develop more of a critical stance towards the object. In the same spirit as when Arthington (2016) warned about the lack of critical voices in the

applications of Mindfulness, and encouraged psychologists and therapists to be mindful of the political implications of the practice, Bettache and Chiu (2019) advocate for a social psychology of neoliberalism that looks at the causes of social inequalities.

3.2.1 | Questioning implicit assumptions

Social and racial inequalities tend to be disregarded in the research on Mindfulness. While there is a rich diversity of Meditation practices in Western and Eastern spiritualities (see Farias et al., 2021), contemporary conceptions of Mindfulness almost systematically rely on Buddhist or psychological approaches (see Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). The systematic association of Mindfulness with Buddhist origins has facilitated its secularization in a supposedly politically neutral context. Would the same apply if meditative practices were presented in connection with Muslim origins or rooted in African or indigenous traditions? According to Karelse (2018), secularizing Mindfulness was political and served the neoliberal dominant ideology which entailed a logic of race-neutral individualization and privatization of health. This produced an apparent dissolution of social and racial inequalities (i.e., post-racialism), which has widely penetrated Mindfulness programs.

Indeed, in an empirical research using critical ethnography and Critical Race Theory addressing racism within a Mindfulness training for educators, Davis and BehmCross (2020) identified three main caveat: race neutral curricula and facilitation, primacy of individualization over systemic explanations, and protection of White fragility. "When educators focus on individual/micro level work void of critical self-reflection on internalized oppression and privilege, actively ignore systems-level conversations" (Davis & BehmCross, 2020, p. 590), Mindfulness curriculum and discourses adopt a race-neutral perspective. Built upon the unquestioned notion of common humanity, Mindfulness' color-blind ideology systematically downplays the hardships faced by Black communities and diminishes the role of race in the construction of one's identity. This echoes Vesely-Flad (2017) who demonstrates how Socially Engaged Buddhism, which corresponds to Buddhism with practical action, has always failed to acknowledge oppression based on race. Indeed, for racialized practitioners, the modern doctrine of No Self (i.e., the absence of an independent and permanent self) can be harmful because it dismisses "the weight of colonialism, genocide, slavery, and systemic racism that have been justified by interpretations of the body" (Vesely-Flad, 2017, p. 5). Consequently, and based on these reflections, the decolonization of Mindfulness implies exposing and deconstructing these discourses and narratives with appropriate methodologies and a specific attention on Whiteness that imbue Mindfulness programs.

Eventually, certain forms of Mindfulness-based activism and resistance to social injustices do exist, drawing inspiration from Socially Engaged Buddhism, feminism or eco-activism (e.g., Crowder, 2016; Lysack, 2009; Scherer & Waistell, 2018). These initiatives challenge the conventional in-ward and other-worldly preoccupations of Buddhist philosophy. Within this framework, Mindfulness is not a therapeutic tool per se, instead, it relies on Buddhist concepts such as interpersonal empathy, compassion, commitment and interdependence rather than regulation and present-moment centeredness, in order to address repercussions of neoliberal capitalism, including competitiveness, profit-driven logics or environmental destruction.

3.2.2 | Opening the toolbox of critical social psychology

An empirical, critical social psychology of Mindfulness that challenges health, social or environmental issues associated with neoliberalism is feasible. Researchers can draw on or adapt critical quantitative methods that combine critical (race) theory and intersectionality with quantitative methods (see Lopez et al., 2018; Sablan, 2019). On a group level, critical social psychology can systematically examine 1) *what* is socially regulated (bodily, emotionally or

in terms of attention and present-centeredness) or socially accepted in Mindfulness practices, 2) *how* the objects of these processes relate to social or social psychological variables such as social positions (i.e., gender, socioeconomic categories, or belonging to a minority) and 3) *why* this reflects societal demands and power structures. Bettache et al. (2020)'s two-level conceptualization of how neoliberalism fosters social inequalities provides a framework for guiding future empirical research on the relationship between Mindfulness and neoliberalism. For instance, at a social psychological level, examining how the practice of Mindfulness relates to beliefs in personal control over life events, or its association with identification (or lack thereof) with activist movements like feminism and levels of system justification, could shed light on the endorsement of neoliberal ideology. On a sociological level, this would involve studying the relationship between the presence of economic freedom, belief in meritocracy and the distribution of power within societies or communities.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is another useful method to examine talk-in-interaction, deciphering the construction of meaning within specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, and unveiling underlying power relations and structures, including in clinical environments. The construction of an identity and attributed meanings are continually shaped through the interpretation of content present in the participants' discourse during interactions, all within a larger macro-context (Gale, 2010). Given that the concept of self is central to Mindfulness, power structures can be identified in discourses concerning the formation of one's identity, including the potential incorporation of neoliberal ideology, within Mindfulness practice settings. Empirically, for instance, this can be observed in the discourse between Mindfulness instructors and trainees.

Finally, given the paucity of research in the field of community Mindfulness intervention programs (Creswell, 2017), advancing social psychological research and applications in this field can aid in comprehending how underserved or stigmatized communities experience Mindfulness protocols and what outcomes those yield. Two guidelines warrant consideration: 1) adapt Mindfulness-based programs culturally and socially to the specific characteristics of the community, to reduce the imperialistic and universalizing aspects of modern mindfulness. This should entail that the program design involves both the beneficiaries and the researchers/clinicians, similar to the approach taken by Le and Gobert (2015) with a Native American population, although this raises the question whether the inclination to adapt Mindfulness protocols for indigenous populations, who have their own distinct rituals, might already be a glaring manifestation of neoliberalism, and 2) gather relevant qualitative data that focus on collective improvement in addition to individual improvement measures, and also includes adverse events at both the individual and collective levels.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the extent to which Mindfulness interventions and private practices have deviated from Buddhist ethics (e.g., skillful behaviors and speech) reducing Mindfulness to a mere attentional training technique (Purser & Milillo, 2015), we advocate for the reintegration of ethics at the core of Mindfulness social psychology research. This necessitates a careful examination of the way "psychology supports the status quo by socializing its citizens to a capitalist ideology" (Gezgin, 2018, p. 4) and inadvertently contributes to the neglect of prevalent social and health inequalities, which are accentuated under neoliberal programs. Many previously cited scholars critique a science of Mindfulness that either complacently aligns with or fuels the Self-help industry and the self-exploitation of individuals (see Table 1 for a summary). While this has initiated a crucial avenue of research, exploring how meditators and researchers challenge (or conform to) power structures and contribute to the organization of social justice could pave the way to a prolific new strand of empirical investigation, notably within the realm of interdisciplinarity.

TABLE 1 Summary of critical arguments related to Mindfulness research and its applications.

References	Concept or field	Argument
Goyal et al. (2014); Kreplin et al. (2018); Van Dam et al. (2018)	Lack of evidence of efficacy	There are low levels of evidence or a lack of evidence supporting claims of improvements promoted in organizations (e.g, stress reduction, increased attention or social connectedness, reduced aggression and prejudice).
Farias et al. (2020); Van Dam et al. (2018)	Adverse events	There is a high prevalence of adverse events in meditation-based therapies (8.3%) and a lack of research on adverse social events.
Carvalho and Grácio (2022); Purser (2021); Purser and Milillo (2015); Purser and Ng (2015); Walsh (2018); Wrenn (2022)	McMindfulness; corporate mindfulness;	The practice of a decontextualized mindfulness by employees within organizations, aimed at self-regulation, may risk individualizing responsibility for potential detrimental work conditions, fostering acceptance of the corporate status quo, prioritizing productivity and aligning with a neoliberal agenda.
Davis and BehmCross (2020); Karelse (2018); Vesely-Flad (2017)	"Whiteness" in mindfulness programs; racism	Mindfulness' color-blind ideology, conveying the doctrine of No self and common humanity, downplays the hardships faced by black communities. It leads to the apparent dissolution of racial inequalities and diminishes the role of race in shaping one's identity, while remaining a predominantly white practice.
Arthington (2016)	Mindfulness as a technique of governmentality	On a psychological level, mindfulness promotes neoliberal forms of governmentality consisting in individual responsibility, autonomy and free choice. It drives individuals towards self-improvement and self-discipline.
Forbes (2017); Reveley (2013, 2016)	Medicalization of education	Mindfulness at school medicalizes education. It contributes to the psychologization and responsibilization of the youngest. Systemic factors causing teachers and students stress remain unaddressed.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

References	Concept or field	Argument
Doran (2017); Reveley (2013); Rimke (2020)	Commodification; marketization; therapeutic industry	Mindfulness has become the solution for increased attention and cognitive functioning. It is marketed as any other commodity incorporated into the therapeutic and self-help/happiness industry of neoliberal capitalism.
Stanley (2012), Stanley et al. (2018) Walsh (2016)	Secularization; ethics; positivism	Secularizing mindfulness involves marketing it as a value-free practice with universal benefits, eroding the foundational ethics of the practice. Secular mindfulness is absorbed within a positivist paradigm that prioritizes its quantification and measurement.

Note: This table is a synthesis of the critical viewpoints presented in the article, and it is possible that other sources have articulated differing arguments of which we are not aware.

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ORCID

Philippine Chachignon https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3679-926X

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Philippine Chachignon is a PhD student at the Laboratory of Social Psychology of the University of Aix-Marseille. Her thesis develops a multi-level perspective of psychological and psychosocial phenomena in the context of Mindfulness meditation (MM). It focuses on the effects of the practice of MM on self-contents and self-related processes, social identity and ideological processes such as individualism and neoliberalism.

Emmanuelle Le Barbenchon is an associate professor (with accreditation to supervise research) of Social Psychology and researcher at the Laboratory of Social Psychology of the University of Aix-Marseille. She is a mindfulness instructor and her main research interests focus on social psychology of health and positive psychology.

Lionel Dany is a professor of Social Psychology and researcher at the Laboratory of Social Psychology of the University of Aix-Marseille (AMU). He is the dean of AMU's Faculty of Arts, Letters, Languages and Humanities. His main research interests focus on social psychology of health.

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