

## Mindfulness and the ‘psychological imagination’

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**Abstract** We analyse the rise of ‘mindfulness’ in English language media discourses and contextualise it in terms of its expression of a persistent underlying ‘psychological imagination’ in contemporary thinking about social problems. An inversion of C. Wright Mills’ much-cited sociological imagination, the psychological imagination draws on medical-scientific authority to treat social problems as private concerns rooted in individual biology, mentality and behaviour. We analyse the roles which academic claims-making, commercial interests and mass mediatisation have played in the rise of mindfulness from the late 1970s onwards. We first map the translation of mindfulness from Buddhist philosophy into Western psychotherapy and popular psychology before considering its emergence and expression in the public sphere of news media claims-making. We argue that where the sociological imagination ‘promised’ above all the treatment of private troubles as public issues and insights into the ‘human variety’ produced by myriad ways of living, the psychological imagination promises the isolation of public issues as private concerns rooted in individual biology, mentality and behaviour. The psychological imagination permeates the expression of mindfulness as a solution to social ills and symbolises the comparative decline of assumptions implicit in Mills’ 20th century rousing call to social scientists.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, sociological imagination, social problems, news media, social construction

### Introduction

Over the past decade, ‘mindfulness’ has been gaining ground, not simply as a practice in the private life of individuals, but as a widely promoted personal and social panacea. The introduction to a *Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness*, claims:

‘Throughout history, human beings have sought to discover the causes of suffering and the means to alleviate it. Sooner or later, we all ask the same questions: ‘Why am I not feeling better?’ ‘What can I do about it?’ [...] As this book will show, mindfulness is a deceptively simple way of relating to all experience that can reduce suffering and set the stage for positive personal transformation. It is a core psychological process that can alter how we respond to the unavoidable difficulties in life—not only to everyday existential challenges,

but also to severe psychological problems such as suicidal ideation [...], chronic depression [...], and psychotic delusions [...].’ (Siegel *et al.* 2009: 17)

It thus offers answers not only to clinical concerns, but issues troubling humanity since the dawn of time. While ‘deceptively simple’, proponents argue, it is at the same time a matter of serious scholarship and psychotherapeutic practice.

Yet mindfulness also bears many hallmarks of a fad (Best 2006), characterised by a steep incline in interest and expansive, often evangelical claims about its potential. Internationally, mindfulness self-help books climb best-seller lists, companies and even universities send staff to mindfulness seminars to better cope with working life, and mass media survey the mindfulness boom with great interest. Mindfulness has become part of popular culture, and consumption of products and services associated with it has become widely fashionable among both individuals and organisations. A chapter in *The Mindfulness Revolution* promises the ‘mindful consumer can help change the world’ and offers tips on tracking the ‘karmic virtues’ of various consumer products (Goleman 2011: 245). *The Guardian*, a leading daily with global reach, asks ‘Mindful sex: could it put an end to unhappiness in bed?’ (Saner 2018), suggests, ‘mindfulness offers hope to tinnitus sufferers’ (Doward 2018), and points readers to the ‘best yoga, mindfulness and fitness breaks for 2018’ (Dunford 2018).

Drawing on a contextual constructionist approach to social problems (Best 2017) we consider the ways that mindfulness operates in public discussions of social issues. Drawing out similarities with previous self-help and therapeutic fads in terms of the admixture of romanticism and scientism (Frawley 2016, Yen 2010), and conceptual and self-help entrepreneurship (Hewitt 1998, Nehring *et al.* 2016), we argue that mindfulness illuminates an implicit and broader ‘psychological imagination’ in public constructions of social ills. Echoing yet inverting C. Wright Mills’ (1959) famous ‘sociological imagination’, mindfulness discourses communicate particular ideas about solutions to social problems, the nature of human beings and how they can be known and the goals that individuals and societies ought to pursue. While the precise legacy of Mills’ work is contested (Scott and Nilsen, 2013), it is emblematic of a vision of sociology that is committed to publicly visible and politically engaged scholarship that explores the social-structural origins of social problems (Gane and Back 2012).

Yet, mindfulness discourses highlight public discussions in which Mills’ emphases appear inverted. Where Mills offered private troubles as public issues and insights into the ‘human variety’ produced by myriad ways of living, the psychological imagination promises the isolation of public issues as private concerns rooted in individual biology, mentality and behaviour. Where Mills advocated independent, problem driven research, one sees bureaucratic servitude and an affection for methodological complexity (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2014). Finally, where Mills situated the task of sociology within more or less taken for granted values of freedom and reason (Oakes 2016, Treviño 2012), the psychological imagination takes for granted the quest for ‘wellbeing’.

We offer mindfulness as a case study in the expression of this imagination, but it is our contention that it also sheds light on how a number of issues are connected, an important avenue for social problems research (Best 2015). This conceptualisation reflects aspects of what others have described as a ‘therapeutic’ cultural turn (see Madsen 2018, pp. 2ff for recent overview). However, it draws attention more acutely to questions regarding the public role and relevance of sociological knowledge. The psychological imagination appears as a ‘quality of mind’ (Mills 1959: 4) increasingly in demand. A Mills revival in the 2000s notwithstanding (Scott and Nilsen, 2013), it raises questions about the role of public sociology and why Mills’ values of understanding social structure, independence, freedom and reason, seem comparatively outmoded.

In what follows, we consider what mindfulness might reveal about the construction of the psychological imagination, or the ways in which therapeutic knowledge claims are disseminated and whose underlying assumptions come to form part of the 'common sense' of social life and social problems. We look at the ways in which academic knowledge and its clinical therapeutic applications, commercial interests and public claims-making are bound up with each other in the constitution of the psychological imagination. Following an account of the translation of mindfulness from Buddhist philosophy to Western popular psychology from the late 1970s onwards, we document the trajectory of claims-making across English-speaking academic and popular media sources since the 1980s. In the concluding sections, we consider the implications of the psychological imagination as 'common sense' for alternative, sociologically informed accounts of social problems and sociological critique.

### From philosophy to self-help fad

As later sections show, mindfulness claims tend to be framed by a combination of novelty, expansiveness, romanticism and scientism. They thus adopt what is becoming an increasingly common public narrative style that, as Yen (2010: 70) describes in relation to positive psychology, combines scientific jargon with popular rhetoric and positions the discourse as 'rooted in ancient philosophical sensibility yet eminently relevant to contemporary concerns'. This section sketches out the origins of this blending, examining its emergence into Western therapeutic practice and popular culture and conversion from philosophy to fad.

This blending begins with the constitution of mindfulness as a 'useful label', or categories created and instrumentalised to serve specific institutional and individual objectives. Mindfulness derives from currents in Buddhist philosophy and spirituality that neither require nor are necessarily amenable to categorisation and classification. Labels, however, are useful as terms of reference around which academic fields of enquiry and careers may coalesce. Labels also serve commercial purposes, allowing classification of products and services to be easily marketed to consumers. As we discuss in greater detail below, mindfulness has come to be instrumentalised both in the constitution of a burgeoning subfield of psychotherapeutic enquiry and in the uses of psychotherapy for financial gain. Its faddishness is thus inseparable from the academic need to demonstrate novelty in research and the similar role that novelty plays in media, consumer culture and marketing.

Academic discourses on mindfulness draw on a romantic sense of modern people as cut off from a truer or more authentic way of living. Seeking to define mindfulness, David Brazier, a psychotherapist and Buddhist priest who has contributed significantly to its development in the West, writes:

'Mindfulness, as the term is now used, refers to a set of techniques in which one gives deliberate sustained attention to presently occurring ambient, somatic or subjective phenomena. [...] It seems that modern people have commonly lost touch with their bodies and need teaching to pay attention to sensations, thoughts and feelings as they occur and to do so in a less judgemental manner.' (Brazier 2013: 117)

Brazier (2013: 117) explains the English word mindfulness originates in the term *sati* in Pali or *smṛiti* in Sanskrit. Its translation as 'mindfulness' entails, as Brazier (2013: 117f.) suggests, an 'apologetic move' or reframing in terms 'already familiar to or popular with the audience'. Mindfulness is thus confirmed by ancient wisdom, but translatable in terms (theological, philosophical, psychological, medical, commercial) that are meaningful and practically relevant to its Western audiences of scholars, clinical practitioners, self-help entrepreneurs and lay consumers.

Until the end of the 1960s, mindfulness is exclusively mentioned in publications on Buddhist theology and philosophy (Thera 1968). Its rise also coincides with growing popularity of Buddhism in general in Western culture (Coleman 2001). However, from the mid to late 1970s, mindfulness begins to appear outside the context of Buddhist thought in academic publications on new models for psychotherapeutic practice (Deatherage 1973, Kabat-Zinn 1982, Kornfield 1979, Walsh *et al.* 1978). Many early academic proponents of mindfulness, such as Daniel Goleman and Jon Kabat-Zinn, became highly successful self-help entrepreneurs, gaining considerable publicity and revenue with their marketing of self-help books and other popular psychological products (Goleman 1996, 2006, Kabat-Zinn 1990, 2016). We return to this in the next section. This early period thus marks the trajectory of mindfulness from South and East Asian theology and philosophy into Western academic debates and clinical practice.

In the 1990s and 2000s, mindfulness remained a comparatively niche area of academic debate, even while transitioning into popular psychology. Kabat-Zinn's self-help book *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn 1990) is notable in this regard. Originally published in 1990, it became a bestseller, being reissued several times, most recently in 2013 (Kabat-Zinn 2013). *Full Catastrophe Living* may be classed as a self-help book in that it speaks to a general, rather than academic, audience and offers readers personal fulfilment through systematic, self-directed, conscious behavioural modification. In this context, it draws on medical-scientific arguments to establish its narrative authority. This is particularly clear in the book's opening sentences:

'This book is an invitation to the reader to embark upon a journey of self-development, self-discovery, learning, and healing. It is based on ten years of clinical experience with over four thousand people who have begun this lifelong journey via their participation in an eight-week course known as the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (SR&RP) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. [...] The people who embark on this journey in the stress clinic do so in an effort to regain control of their health and to attain at least some peace of mind. They come referred by their doctors for a wide range of medical problems [...].' (Kabat-Zinn 1990: 1f.)

Through Kabat-Zinn's academic work, he possesses authority through contributions of concepts and techniques under the label of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Crane *et al.* 2015, Kabat-Zinn 2003b). He is also a highly successful self-help entrepreneur, through self-help books (Kabat-Zinn 2016), products such as CDs and other media (Stress Reduction Tapes, 2018), as well as courses advertised through online platforms such as Facebook. His online shop makes clear the business angle of his MBSR work:

'**Mindfulnesscds.com** was one of the earliest web commerce sites. It has been in continual operation since 1998. Before the mainstream development of the worldwide web, we were a mail-order business, begun in 1990. [...] The business exists to make Dr. Kabat-Zinn's guided mindfulness meditation practices broadly available [...].' (Stress Reduction Tapes, 2018; emphasis in original)

This combination of scholarship, popular psychology and business makes Kabat-Zinn closely resemble the figure of the 'self-help entrepreneur' elaborated elsewhere (Nehring *et al.* 2016). This term characterises the entrepreneurial mobilisation of academic knowledge and authority for commercial gain through a range of popular psychological products and services. It highlights the fusion of scholar, writer and businessperson crucial to the popularisation of psychological knowledge and practice from at least the late 19th century (Nehring *et al.* 2016). Through these activities, mindfulness has spread since the 1990s through everyday life and

institutions from schools and universities (Swain 2016), to families (Gehart 2012) and workplaces (Hougaard *et al.* 2016).

In this way, mindfulness bears many hallmarks of a fad (Best 2006). As enthusiasm surges, scholars, clinical practitioners and self-help entrepreneurs expand claims to its academic and practical relevance across virtually every institution on an international scale. This expansion has entailed the full transformation of source material into something widely marketable. Broad audiences are served, for instance, a series of 'for dummies' texts, including *Mindfulness at Work: Essentials for Dummies* (Alidina and Adams 2010). Here, mindfulness becomes a tool for enhancing workplace productivity in times of economic crisis:

'In tough economic times, many organisations are looking for new ways to deliver better products and services to customers while simultaneously reducing costs. [...] Leaders must really engage staff, and everyone needs to become more resilient in the face of ongoing change. For these reasons, more and more organisations are offering staff training in mindfulness. [...] Mindfulness can help you to become more aware of your thoughts, feelings and sensations in a way that suspends judgement and self-criticism. Developing the ability to pay attention to and see clearly whatever is happening moment by moment does not eliminate life's pressures, but it can help you respond to them in a more productive, calmer manner.' (Alidina and Adams 2010: 5f.)

'Productive' is arguably the operative word. Mindfulness thus promises a technique for 'leaders' to produce 'resilient' workers 'in the face of ongoing change'. It becomes aligned with features of the neoliberal workplace, including the precariousness that increasingly characterises work from the 1990s (Sennett 2006), promising the 'resilience' institutionally demanded to cope with insecurity (Harrison 2012). This alignment of mindfulness with the hegemonic idiom of neoliberalism thus might be read as an endpoint of the shifts of meaning Brazier (2013) describes, as it becomes melded into the commonsense of neoliberal cultural norms. *Mindfulness at Work Essentials for Dummies* thus symbolises its full transition from relative obscurity to legitimising discourse within contemporary capitalism.

In face of this transition, some scholars propose what they see as a more complex account, tied explicitly to notions of social suffering. Thus, David Forbes (2019: 4) laments that commercialised mindfulness as proposed by Kabat-Zinn has become 'technical, vapid, devoid of any moral basis or wisdom, and lacking any critical social context, analysis and direction'. Elsewhere, Purser *et al.* (2016) tie such critique to a call for what they term 'civic or social mindfulness', i.e. an account of mindfulness that involves critical awareness towards the institutional setting and socioeconomic processes that engender social suffering. However, as we aim to show below, neither dilution nor mass mediation is at issue. Rather, mindfulness implicitly signals that the starting point for solving the intractable problems of our times is not necessarily to grapple with these structures, but rather non-specific projects in awareness raising. Thus, the issue we seek to raise is the descent of the sociological imagination in public life implicit in the penchant for reducing social structures to individuals and milieus and the rooting of persistent social ills in the attitudes and behaviours of ordinary people.

## Methods

We employ qualitative media analysis (QMA) and 'tracking discourse' (Altheide and Schneider 2013) to trace the development of mindfulness discourses in the news and other media from the early 1980s to 2018, shedding light on the meanings and role attributed mindfulness



in social life and 'public issues'. QMA is a symbolic interactionist approach, focusing on 'the meaning of activity, the situation in which it emerges, and the importance of interaction for the communication process' (Altheide and Schneider 2013: 14). A flexible approach of constant discovery and comparison, it moves from a broad understanding of the subject matter and context of document production to theoretical sampling based on an emergent understanding of the topic. QMA involves five stages: (1) identification of documents, (2) developing a protocol for data collection, (3) data coding and organisation, (4) data analysis and (5) reporting (ibid., p. 39). It is an iterative rather than strictly linear process; initial research questions are refined and supplemented as initial sampling raises new questions requiring additional sampling and comparison.

Beginning by 'tracking discourse', or 'following certain issues, words, themes, and frames over a period of time, across different issues, and across different media' (Altheide and Schneider 2013: 118), we tracked the rise of the keyword 'mindfulness' in the Nexis database's English language news. However, since Nexis holdings increase over time, increases in results are somewhat artificial. Thus, it is necessary to confine keyword searches to particular sources with continuous holdings across a defined period of time. We thus selected four major newspapers of record drawn from four majority English-speaking countries: *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), *Globe and Mail* (Canada), *The New York Times* (US) and *The Times* (UK), for which Nexis has continuous holdings since 1987. Figure 1 shows an increase in coverage of mindfulness since the late 1980s, with duplicate articles omitted.

The initial question guiding the research concerned the origins, character and diffusion of mindfulness claims. A keyword search for 'mindfulness' was performed in 'all news, all languages' in Nexis prior to 1995 (capturing the first fifteen years since Kabat-Zinn's initial development of 'mindfulness' as a stand-alone phenomenon). Results were imported into NVivo to create an initial database totalling 131 articles from 1980 to 1995. Initial codes and general trends in terms of early diffusion and dispersion were identified. Emergent themes were clarified with additional keyword searches across the database as a whole as well as other

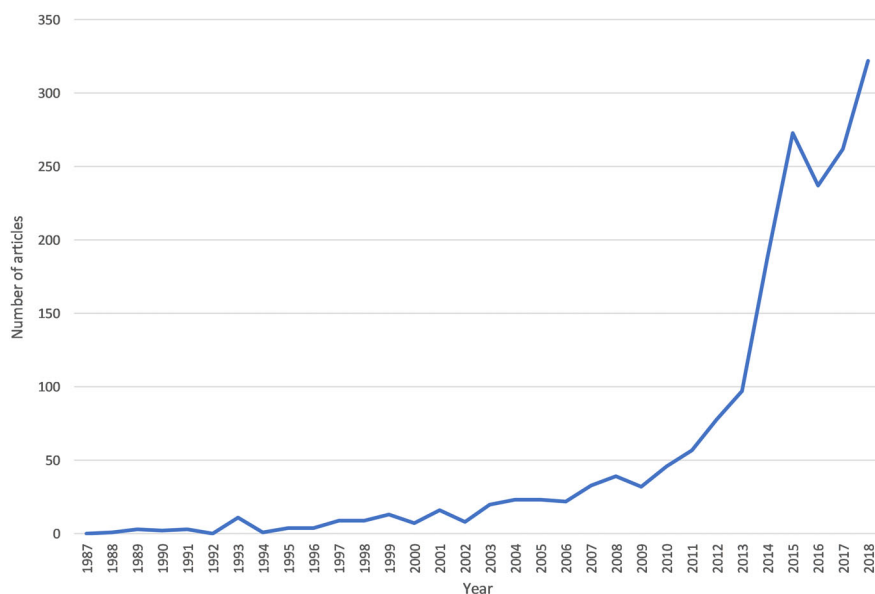


Figure 1 Articles containing keyword 'mindfulness' (1987-2018) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

media. This led to identification of additional mass media documents including documentaries, popular books and websites of prominent figures emerging within the news media sample.

To explore claims during mindfulness' steep rise to prominence, we sampled 11 articles from 2010 when article numbers begin to increase markedly. This sample was generated by searching for 'mindfulness' in the four aforementioned newspapers in 2010, generating 49 results. To analyse only in-depth discussions of mindfulness, the following protocol was developed:

- At least half of the article focused on mindfulness
- Greater than 500 words

All results were read and those meeting these criteria were imported into the NVivo database. This sample was compared to earlier texts and general themes drawn out.

We noted a trend toward an expansive array of problems said to be remediable by mindfulness. To look at this further, we sampled the 10 most relevant articles (sorted by Nexis<sup>1</sup>) mentioning 'mindfulness' in the same newspapers in 2015, the year at which the discourse can be observed to reach an initial peak and problems claimed to be solvable by mindfulness drawn out. Additional keyword searches were performed across the Nexis database to track activities and claims of significant claims-makers emergent in the sample as well as the overall frequency of observed collocations (e.g. mindfulness and stress; wellbeing), which are detailed below.

### *Mediating mindfulness*

It is clear that Kabat-Zinn's MBSR training, initially developed in the late 1970s and 1980s, had considerable impact within the first years of its emergence. Already by the 2000s it had spread to hospitals, clinics, schools, workplaces, corporate offices, law schools and prisons around the world (Kabat-Zinn 2003a: p. 149). The discourse appears to have spread through a combination of mass mediation and formal and informal networks including professional associations, teaching programmes and training workshops. The initial eight-week training programme, delivered out of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, had trained 16,000 people by its 25th anniversary in 2005 (Kabat-Zinn 1990). Many of those trained at the University of Massachusetts would go on to create their own teacher training programmes. This training has since proliferated with no standardisation of educational requirements for practitioners (see eg Selva 2017). Through these channels, new initiates encounter the discourse and potentially act as agents of diffusion as they move across institutions and organisations.

However, increasingly this spread is facilitated by mass mediation. That is, mindfulness was not only mediated through training, clinical interventions, scholarly debate, popular self-help books and other commercial paraphernalia, but also through the news media in connection with social issues. In news media claims-making, claims-makers drew on a 'prehistory' of cultural resources for meaning and salience, including the already growing popularity of Buddhism in Western culture and existing social issues to which mindfulness was positioned as a solution. Indeed, the first mentions of mindfulness in the sample were peripheral to broader claims about Buddhism's potential to re-enchant modern life (e.g. 'Buddhist monk tells of peaceful, simple way of life', Pugh 1987). Figure 2 illustrates the interconnections between these spheres.

A key example of this assembly of forces is a 1993 feature on mindfulness in the PBS series *Healing and the Mind*, highlighting Kabat-Zinn and the Massachusetts Medical Centre. The show followed participants through 8 weeks of training and reported results, in the words of one patient, 'like a miracle' (Moyers 1993). News media reports of the time describe a

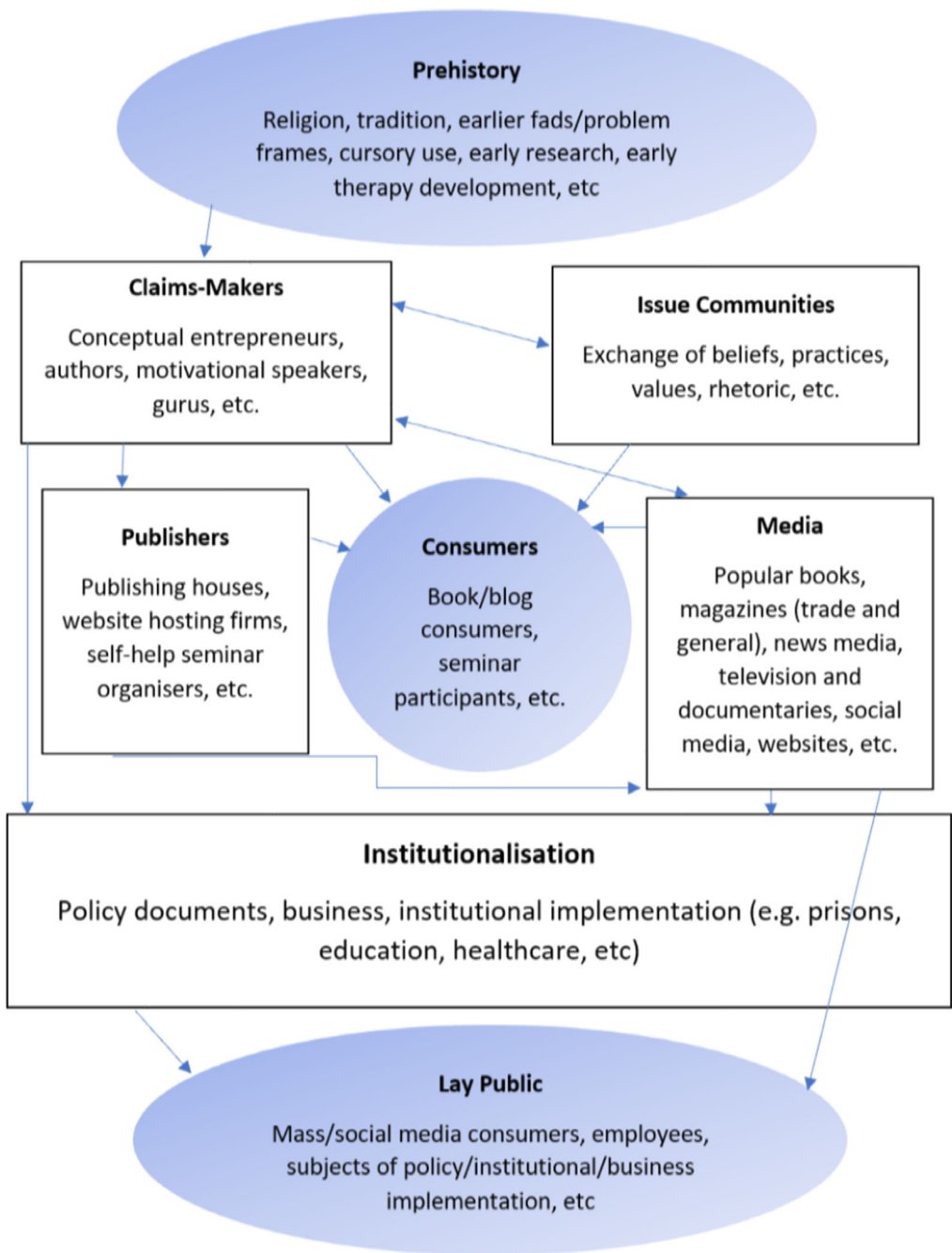


Figure 2 *Paths of Diffusion* [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

proliferation of new training programmes inspired by the episode (e.g. Suzukamo 1996) which has since been described as a key moment in the practice's spread (Crane *et al.* 2010).



For conceptual entrepreneurs, reportage in the media has been a key part of gaining recognition and facilitating spread beyond face to face and professional networks. While self-help entrepreneurship focuses on the commercial aspects of this process, Hewitt (1998: 49) defines 'conceptual entrepreneurs' as those who 'seek to develop and promote ideas about the solution of individual and social problems'. Typically focusing on a single idea or concept, conceptual entrepreneurs differ from moral entrepreneurs who focus on notions of 'right' and 'wrong' and from other social problem activists who seek recognition of conditions they define as troubling. Instead, conceptual entrepreneurs promote a particular solution to social problems whose definitions and troublesome nature they usually take for granted.

Emerging as a key conceptual entrepreneur in the 1980s and 1990s, Kabat-Zinn illustrates well Hewitt's (1998) four-part description of conceptual entrepreneurs who (1) engage in claims-making to convince others of the importance of their discoveries, (2) strongly and sometimes unequivocally emphasise scientific underpinnings of claims and scientific credentials of claims-makers (even if firm research foundations have yet to be established), (3) promote specific programmes based on the central idea, often with their own 'twist' and (4) stand to gain financially from their activities (Table 1).

Table 1 *Mindfulness and conceptual entrepreneurship*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Excerpts and additional details</i>
1) Claims-making to spread new concept	Kabat-Zinn develops mindfulness as 'useful label'; first to take ownership (Best 2017) and consciously facilitate spread. Reflections decades later show consciousness of rhetorical work: 'And because naming is very important in how things are understood and either accepted or not, I felt that the entire undertaking needed to be held by an umbrella term broad enough to contain the multiplicity of key elements that seemed essential to field a successful clinical programme in the cultural climate of 1979' (Kabat-Zinn 2011)
2) Emphasis on expertise/science sometimes before research is available or conclusive	'Kabat-Zinn is no lotus-seated yogi - he has a PhD in molecular biology and runs the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Hospital.' (Austen 1994) 'And this [research result of one study] is across all the different diagnoses that people are sent for. So it's not just like the headache patients do well or the cancer patients do well or the heart disease patients do well. They all do well.' (Kabat-Zinn quoted in Salvatore <i>et al.</i> 1999). Kabat-Zinn concedes early academic research was descriptive rather than definitive in terms of demonstrating efficacy (Kabat-Zinn 2003a, p. 145). Crane <i>et al.</i> (2010) note large amounts of research did not begin to appear until the early 2000s.
3) Promotion of specific programmes, often with personal twist	'At the University of Massachusetts Hospital and Medical School, people like Peter can learn to build up mental fitness as well as physical stamina after major illness. In the heart of this temple of high-tech medicine, Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn's Stress Reduction Clinic teaches patients how to help their own recovery through ancient meditation practices, which he has adapted for use in modern medicine.' (Robertson 1994)
4) Personal gain	Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as emerging from a vision in which it provided 'right livelihood for thousands of practitioners' (Kabat-Zinn 2011: 287). Mindfulness routinely attracts large research grants, fee paying trainees, commercial sales of books, audio guides, etc. The meditation and mindfulness industry generated an estimated \$1.2 billion in America in 2017 (Kim 2018).

Across its life course, mindfulness also tends to be consistently portrayed as (1) confirmed by ancient philosophy and scientific discovery, (2) entailing financial benefits/costs for those who take action/fail to do so, (3) having expansive ameliorative potential (i.e. as 'cure-alls' or panaceas), (Table 2).

As to the latter, conceptual entrepreneurs position mindfulness as an easily isolable personal solution to a wide variety of problems. A sample of ten articles in Anglophone papers at the initial peak of interest (2015) includes expansive claims about mindfulness' benefits and ameliorative potential (Table 3).

However, like many fads, its expansiveness and sheer ubiquity engenders backlash. Two of these articles were critical in overall tone, particularly in relation to mindfulness as a panacea. One journalist remarks, 'Current books by Kabat-Zinn and scores of others now drop the word "meditation" altogether and propose mindfulness as the pharmakon for a heterogeneous deck of modern infirmities' (Heffernan 2015).

From its inception however, claims focused most on stress, particularly at work, the latter of which ascended into public consciousness in the 1970s and 1980s (Wainwright and Calnan 2002). As a method of relaxation, stress reduction is central to mindfulness's claimed mechanism of action. However, over time, claims-makers also positioned it as a solution to the then ascendant concern with wellbeing (see Sointu 2005, 2006) and mental health. Figure 3 shows the proportion of articles mentioning 'mindfulness' that also contained references to additional emotion issue keywords.<sup>2</sup> While stress has remained central to claims-making about mindfulness, mental health and wellbeing have emerged as significant goals in whose pursuit mindfulness is enlisted.

Table 2 *Rhetoric of mindfulness*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Excerpts and additional details</i>
1) Confirmed by ancient philosophy and modern science	<p>'Mindfulness originated in Eastern meditation traditions such as Buddhism but is now an established secular discipline. A growing body of research [...]' (Lister 2010).</p> <p>'Perhaps that's why psychology and healthcare experts are turning to a strategy developed in a much earlier age. Mindfulness meditation has been around for more than 2,000 years [...]. Studies have found that mindfulness training can protect people from depression, reduce their stress levels [...]' (Halliwell &amp; Heaversedge, 2010).</p> <p>This rhetorical formulation appears common across many therapeutic discourses including self-esteem (Hewitt 1998), happiness (Frawley 2016) and positive psychology (Yen 2010).</p>
2) Financial costs and benefits	<p>'[...] mainstream medicine and corporations are seizing upon mindfulness meditation and other stress-reduction strategies to battle the modern scourge: stress. It's a scourge that costs American business an estimated \$150 billion annually in lost productivity, health care and disability.' (Gathright 1995)</p> <p>'The report argues that if more GPs could offer [mindfulness] therapy it would sharply reduce the financial burden of depression, which costs Britain £7.5 billion a year.' (Lister 2010)</p>
3) Personal and social panaceas	<p>'They're unbelievably practical, and they're unbelievably powerful, and they're very useful in the boardroom, and they're very useful in the bedroom, and they're very useful in the playroom, and they're very useful in the operating room' (Kabat-Zinn quoted in Salvatore <i>et al.</i> 1999).</p>

Table 3 Mindfulness benefits and problem-solving

<i>Problems ameliorable by mindfulness</i>	<i>Benefits of mindfulness</i>
Anxiety	Better immune function
Work stress	Creativity
Low self-esteem	Emotional balance
Violence	Energy levels
Mental ill health	Sleep quality
Chronic illness	Learning and focus
High blood pressure	Compassion and kindness
Poor educational attainment	Mood
Prisoner reoffending	Pain
Stress	
Healthcare costs	

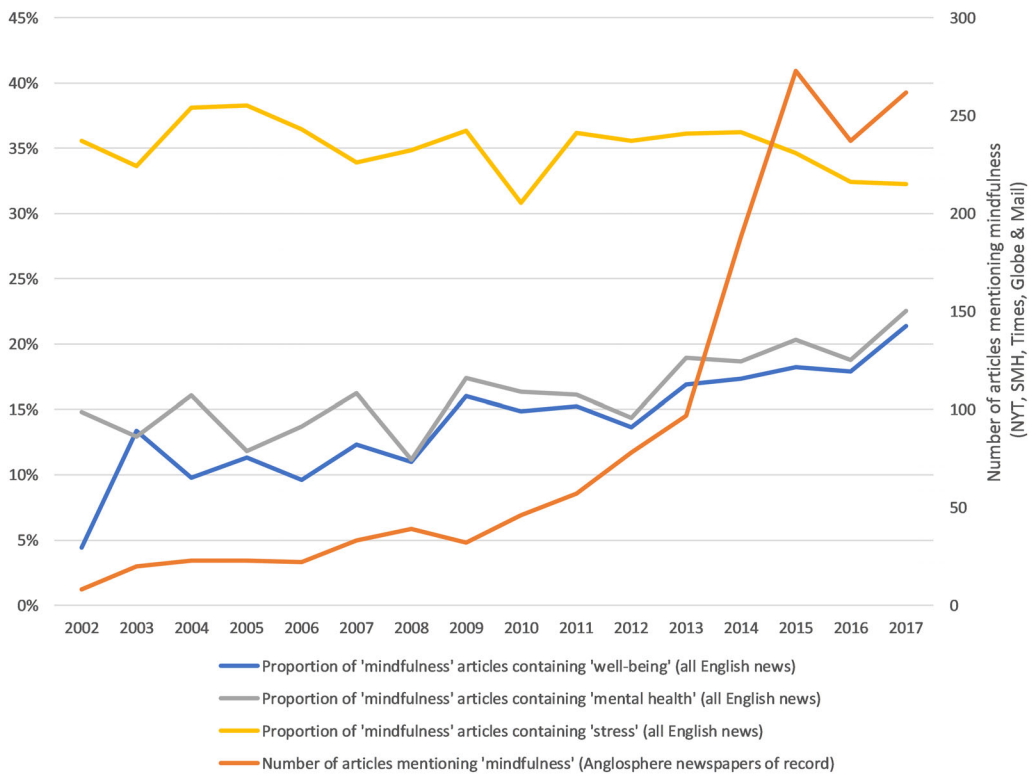


Figure 3 'Mindfulness' and 'mental health', 'wellbeing' and 'stress' [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Criticism appears throughout the discourse, including letters to the editor in the 1990s complaining of diluted sacred concepts. However, advocates openly avow many of these criticisms as selling points. Mindfulness is 'pared' of its religious and philosophical undercurrents, and only those parts claimed to be scientifically proven are carried forward. '[I]t's not like you

have to change your belief systems' Kabat-Zinn informs audiences (Salvatore *et al.* 1999). Moreover, criticism is limited, sporadic and lacks organisation. It appears claims-makers had much more to gain from uniting in support than in opposition.

### *Mindfulness and the psychological imagination*

Reportage confers a sense of importance and can act as an 'advertisement' for commercial products. However, mass mediation also has significant rhetorical effects. Most significantly, as advocates or 'claims-makers' seek to convince the broadest possible audience, claims increasingly come to fit with the 'common sense' of the broader culture (Best 2017). Mindfulness claims narrate cultural assumptions about the relationships of individuals to each other and the problems of society. Taken together these reveal something about the psychological imagination as a powerful underlying cultural outlook driving self-help fads, of which mindfulness is only the most recent example.

The rise of mindfulness can only be partially attributed to its lucrateness and the organisation and activities of dedicated actors with an aura of respectability like Kabat-Zinn. One of the key underlying drivers is its commensurability with the outlook we described at the outset as the 'psychological imagination', which we describe in this section before contrasting with Mills' (1959) sociological counterpart (Table 4).

The psychological imagination furnishes claims-makers with a distinctive 'moral grammar' (Nehring and Kerrigan 2018: 5) which draws on scientific rhetoric to communicate norms and values for everyday life. That is, through public claims-making and a wide range of popular psychological products and services, it articulates particular assumptions about the nature of individuals and their relationships to society and goals worth pursuing.

Mindfulness, as a case study in the psychological imagination, firstly promises the treatment of public issues as private troubles. A wide range of social problems is said to be amenable to interventions promoting the heightened awareness that mindfulness putatively offers. The ability to situate the individual at the heart of social problems is facilitated by the tendency to posit a scientifically discoverable and unchanging human nature, which is held still and rendered amenable to complex scientific observations. History and philosophy are drawn upon not for historicisation but to reinforce this claim to timelessness. As Batchelor (2014: 47) describes of these tendencies in relation to mindfulness meditation:

[...] meditation is presented by its enthusiasts as a "science of the mind"; people are routinely wired up to functional magnetic resonance imaging scanners to take detailed readings of brain function while meditating, and government-sponsored studies are conducted on volunteers over long periods in order to understand the "effectiveness" of meditation.

Such transhistorical and transcultural imageries facilitate similarly transhistorical and transcultural interventions at the individual level. Moreover, claims to scientific foundations and universal applicability facilitate their diffusion and commercial promotion internationally through the activities of self-help entrepreneurs.

Table 4 *The psychological vs sociological imagination*

<i>Psychological Imagination</i>	<i>Sociological Imagination</i>
Public issues as private troubles	Private troubles as public issues
Methodological complexity; service to bureaucracy	Problem driven; independent research
Wellbeing	Freedom and reason

Second, mindfulness, as a currently high-profile articulation of the psychological imagination, emphasises complex scientific and clinical methodologies and bureaucratic service. In this, it bears a resemblance to Mills' 'bureaucratic ethos' (2000, p. 100ff) through which the costs associated with methodologically complex studies tended to subordinate truth-seeking to institutional needs. As we have shown, mindfulness' attraction of investment parallels its expansion from 'stress' to comprehensive ameliorative. Since its scientised inception in the work of Kabat-Zinn, a mindfulness industry has emerged, systematically promoted by celebrities, mass media and business (Furedi 2014). This promotion rides a wave of scholarship applying mindfulness to personal and bureaucratic problems of human resource management across a range of organisational settings (Hougaard *et al.* 2016, Selva 2017). A steady stream of research systematises, standardises and simplifies its key concepts and techniques, offering both scientific authority and organisational solutions (Purser 2019).

Third, the psychological imagination tends to offer 'wellbeing' as the taken for granted goal to be pursued by individuals and society. Through romanticised accounts of the past, an imagined disjunction between human nature and modern life takes centre-stage. In mindfulness discourses, this disjunction can be addressed through systematised introspection. John Kabat-Zinn, quoting a Theravada monk, explains that mindfulness is:

'the unfailing master key for knowing the mind, and is thus the starting point;  
the perfect tool for shaping the mind, and is thus the focal point;  
the lofty manifestation of the achieved freedom of the mind, and is thus the culminating point.' (Kabat-Zinn 2011: 291)

In this sense, human freedom, in Kabat-Zinn's account of mindfulness, becomes an engagement with one's true inner self and human reason is transformed into a greater bodily, emotional and cognitive awareness.

This moral grammar stands in systematic contrast to what Mills (1959) described of the ideal 'sociological imagination' and its place in public life in his eponymous book. Polemicising against methodological and theoretical trends in post-war American sociology, his views were immediately controversial (Treviño 2012, Useem 1961). However, both historical and contemporary reviews of Mills' work (Homans 1960, Myszal 2000, Shils 1961) acknowledge Mills' ambition to reach beyond the academic controversies of his time and offer a general account of sociological reasoning in academia and public life. Thus, the otherwise critical George C. Homans acknowledges: 'To some degree [...] all of us share Mills' values. No one, and certainly not I, will deny that some sociologists would be well employed doing what he calls classic social analysis, and some of them are doing it' (Homans, 1961: 517). In this sense, Mills' 'sociological imagination' is relevant for its concise summary of a particular model of imagining the self and its relationship to society prominent at least since the eighteenth century.

Where the psychological imagination leaves implicit the connections between self and social relationships, between personal troubles and wider social-structural problems, and between individual biography and societal history, the sociological imagination seeks to systematically foreground them. This mode of imagining the social relies crucially on a conceptualisation of social forms and even human nature itself as historically contingent. This openness of human nature was a common concern in classical social enquiry, with Marx and Engels arguing, for instance, that 'the essence of man [sic] is no abstraction inherent in each single individual' (Marx and Engels 1998: 573). Writing in the aftermath of the second world war, Mills points out that the limits of human nature are 'frighteningly broad' (Mills 1959: 6). Where the sociological imagination questions how particular ensembles of relationships, discourses and



historical processes may constitute certain varieties of human experience and conduct, the psychological imagination tends to begin with the individual before building up to social structure (a process Mills dismissed as 'psychologism' [1959, p. 61]).

Third, with admiration of the promise held forth by 'classic' social analysts, Mills situated the task of the social sciences within the Enlightenment tradition. While perhaps the least resilient conclusion of his work (Mjøset 2013), the goal for Mills was to advance the intertwining values of freedom and reason. By contrast, the psychological imagination, while enamoured with empiricism, tends to take wellbeing for granted as the goal of the empirical exercise.

Finally, Mills was a proponent of publicly visible and politically engaged social research (Nehring and Kerrigan 2020). Yet his vision of the public intellectual visible yet independent of bureaucratic agendas contrasts with the self-help entrepreneur, who tends to offer personalised and commercially marketable psychotherapeutic interventions. Mindfulness self-help entrepreneurship also sheds light on its existence as part of a much broader happiness industry (Cabanas and Illouz 2019, Nehring *et al.* 2016) that draws on a variety of therapeutic narratives to market happiness, wellbeing and other positive emotions to paying customers.

The moral grammar of mindfulness thus is part and parcel of general trends towards a psychologisation of contemporary societies and the constitution of the psychological imagination as commonsense (Madsen 2018). Across the early twenty-first century, scholars (e.g. Couldry 2010, Dardot and Laval 2009) have pointed to contemporary capitalism's capacity to unmoor individuals from collective ties and render societal bonds and the sociality of social problems less salient, by reducing everyday life to a series of purely personal experiences. By framing personal troubles in the language of mental health and wellbeing, the psychological imagination plays a central role in this unmaking of the social.

## Conclusion

Mindfulness, as a fad popular across the 2010s, has played an important role in the promotion of the psychological imagination in English-speaking countries. On the one hand, claim-makers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn have worked systematically to establish mindfulness as a distinctive subfield of academic and clinical research in psychology. On the other hand, they have built on the academic success of mindfulness to diffuse it into public life, at national and transnational levels and across a wide range of institutional settings. In this process, advocates draw on a broader cultural context dominated by psychological explanations of human life (Madsen 2018).

Inverting Mills' sociological imagination, the psychological imagination as instantiated in mindfulness discourses, sees public issues in terms of private troubles, ameliorable through individualised interventions. Even when highlighting the structural nature of problems, it focuses on the seemingly more isolable and soluble problems of individual coping and conduct, offering personalised panaceas for social ills. Enamoured with science, it emphasises methodological complexity and becomes increasingly wedded to the needs of institutional conformity. Philosophy and history are mobilised not to historicise social phenomena, but to confirm their timeless nature. Where Mills took for granted the goals of freedom and reason, the psychological imagination offers a moral grammar wherein wellbeing is the end goal and justification for empirical work. While freedom, reason and wellbeing may seem equally arbitrary goals, the question arises as to what sort of society produces such values as self-evident ideals. Finally, Mills emphasised the human variety engendered by myriad ways of living and

attempted to tie these insights into wider public and political debates. In this, he championed a more open conceptualisation of human nature than appears salient in mindfulness claims. The shortcomings of his work, such as grave inattention to matters of race and gender, notwithstanding, the career of C. Wright Mills followed this pattern of public scholarship (Horowitz 1983), as do many sociological careers today. By contrast, self-help entrepreneurs draw on psychological techniques to advance programmes for personal improvement in public life, mobilising scientific and other, e.g. religious, credentials to attain authority with consumers, tying promotion of psychologically motivated self-improvement to commercial endeavours (Nehring *et al.* 2016).

Our description of the psychological imagination illuminates aspects of the cultural context on which mindfulness claims draw and to which they contribute. The contrast with Mills' work illustrates the degree of cultural change and the potential for a deepening crisis of the sociological imagination in public life (Gane 2011). The psychological imagination forms part of larger processes of psychologisation in social life (Madsen 2018), through which the individualising idiom of psychology and its therapeutic applications has come to furnish salient explanations of social problems. Increasingly constituted on a transnational scale (Nehring *et al.* 2016), the psychological imagination appears to take root where alternative explanations to social problems have become exhausted. Austerity and the dismantling of public life (Coul-dry 2010) may also foster views of public issues as private troubles and provide a context in which claims framed as 'deceptively simple' solutions—expensive in the short term but with untold savings in the long term—are particularly likely to gain a hearing. In such contexts, the commercial and political capacity of the therapeutic industry to persuade consumers and institutions of its objectives is intensified.

Yet there remains considerable space for detailed explanations of the psychologisation of social life, particularly with regard to its aforementioned transnational spread. Equally, arguments about the productivity of therapeutic politics (Salmenniemi 2019) and the mobilisation of emotions as commodities in contemporary capitalism (Cabanas and Illouz 2019) suggest that there is much potential for reappraisal of the conceptual foundations of sociological critiques of therapy culture. Through its contrast with the sociological imagination, we posit the psychological imagination as a key site for its reappraisal in relation to sociology and social problems.

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## Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Notes

- 1 Nexis ascertains relevance by keyword frequency and proximity of keywords to headline.
- 2 Data produced by keyword search for 'mindfulness' in Nexis all English language news, then within results searches for 'stress', 'mental health', 'wellbeing' OR 'well-being'. Duplicate articles removed. Graph begins in 2002 as low numbers skew early results.

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