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**Contribution to Special Issue of *Distinktion* on 'The Asset Economy', edited by Lisa Adkins and Martjin Konings.**

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**The Presents of the Present: Mindfulness, Time and Structures of Feeling**

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### **Abstract**

Mindfulness, as the cultivation of ways to become attentive to the present moment, has grown exponentially in some areas of the global north over the past decade or so. As such, it has generated much important debate about its efficacy and the politics it produces, especially in terms of whether and how mindfulness is a response to, or effect of, neoliberalism. Drawing on Berlant's argument that affects are structured and collective but not necessarily determinative of how people feel and act in relation to them, I explore the affective relations between mindfulness and contemporary (neo)liberal culture as a series of relays, modulations, or recalibrations. More specifically, I approach these affective relations through focusing on *temporality*. I argue that the practice of mindfulness as a deliberate and conscious focus on the present is central to how its value is imagined by those who promote it and experienced by those who practice it. Drawing on interviews with mindfulness practitioners, analysis of mindfulness books, online forums and communities, I centre the significance of the present to an understanding of the recent proliferation of mindfulness. I draw out the affectivity of mindfulness presents and think these 'mindfulness presents' alongside Berlant's identification of the significance of the present to contemporary liberal-capitalism. Situating my argument within broader work that sees time, temporality and affect as central means through which contemporary capitalism is organised and hence should be conceived, I examine how mindfulness is perhaps one way in which contemporary liberal-capitalism is felt and lived with.

Mindfulness – the cultivation of ways to become attentive in and to the present moment – has grown exponentially in popularity in some areas of the global north over the past decade or so. It is seen as a crucial way to alleviate mental and physical health illnesses, is promoted by celebrities including Oprah Winfrey, Arianna Huffington and Michael Jordan, and has become a mainstay of wellness programmes offered by workplaces and schools. It has also attracted a good deal of criticism for its commodification and emptying out of its Buddhist routes, and its role in extending neoliberal values and practices, including placing responsibility for (un)wellness onto individuals, obscuring social, economic and political processes. Central to much of the work that seeks to make and understand links between mindfulness and neoliberalism is the argument that mindfulness is a response to neoliberalism. For example, and in broad brush-strokes, mindfulness is either a corporate and often commercialised means for organisations to placate the burnout or ill health that they have caused in their employees or clients, or is a way for individuals to resist neoliberalism by practicing self-care and developing alternative ways of living.

Recognising these debates about the efficacy and especially the politics of mindfulness, in this paper I explore the conundrum of how to conceive the relationships between mindfulness and contemporary (neo)liberal culture without one being seen as the cause of the other. That is, I ask, how might we understand both the value of mindfulness to those who practice and promote it and the socio-cultural worlds in which it gathers appeal, without one or the other becoming explanatory? I address this question by seeing the relations between mindfulness and social and cultural life as *affective*. The value of affect, I suggest, lies in its relationality; that is, affect exists not in pre-determined entities or states but rather emerges in the relations between them, and is constitutive of them. Keeping in mind Lauren Berlant's (2008) point that 'the structure of an affect has no inevitable relation to the penumbra of emotions that may cluster in the wake of its activity,

nor should it' (Berlant 2008: 4), affect is mobilised here to refer to the ways in which the links between mindfulness and neoliberalism are not so much determinative in the sense that neoliberalism manufactures mindfulness nor that mindfulness emerges as a response or resistance to neoliberalism. Instead, I see the affective relations between neoliberalism and mindfulness as a series of relays, modulations or recalibrations in and between individual bodies and wider collective moods or atmospheres or 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977).

More specifically, I approach these affective relations through a focus on *temporality*. I argue that the practice of mindfulness as a deliberate and conscious focus on the present is somewhat overlooked in academic and more popular accounts, but it is central to how its value is imagined by those who promote it and experienced by those who practice it. Drawing on interviews with mindfulness practitioners, analysis of mindfulness books and online forums and communities, I centre the significance of the present to an understanding of the recent proliferation of mindfulness. I explore what 'the present' of mindfulness 'is', how it can be produced and how it is experienced by those I interviewed<sup>1</sup>. In particular, I draw out the affectivity of mindfulness presents; they are embodied and experienced as a range of temporal feelings and intensities. I think these 'mindfulness presents' alongside what Berlant (2008, 2011) has identified as the significance of the present to contemporary liberal-capitalism. She argues that one of the characteristics of today's global north is an ongoing precarious present of 'crisis lived within ordinariness' (2008: 5); a situation that has emerged out of the collapse of fantasies of a better future through which 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal-capitalism functioned. Situating my argument within a broader set of work that sees time, temporality and affect as central means through which contemporary capitalism is organised and hence should be conceived, I examine how mindfulness is perhaps one way in which contemporary liberal-capitalism is felt and lived with. Throughout the paper, then, is a concern with how today's 'present' may be conceived in terms of the significance of an affective experience of the temporal present. That is, I'm interested in what a focus on the present suggests both for those who practice

mindfulness and as means of understanding the experiences of today's social, economic and political structures<sup>2</sup>.

### **Time, temporality and (neo)liberal capitalism**

The significance of time to the changing dynamics of contemporary capitalism has been highlighted by a number of writers. Barbara Adam (2006), for example, has tracked how the development of clock time acts as 'the precondition for industrialisation and capitalist development' (2006: 123). Clock time imposes regularity and quantification on the variability of natural time, including changing seasons and local differences, and social time, including that lived by carers, children, the elderly, the unemployed, producing a standardised time that extends across the globe and makes economic trade possible. Adam notes that with this association between time and money, '[s]peed is valorised as an unquestioned and unquestionable goal' (2006: 126); a goal realised with information and communications technologies (ICT) where 'time compression has reached its zenith: succession and duration have been replaced by seeming instantaneity and simultaneity' (2006: 124). Adam argues then, that while clock time is necessary for understanding many of the historical processes via which capitalism emerges, it is no longer appropriate in understandings of contemporary technological or machinic capitalist time, nor the temporal experiences of 'the great majority of the world's people who function in the shadows of the time economy of money' (2006: 124).

Lisa Adkins (2009, 2017, 2018) also re-thinks the importance of clock time to contemporary capitalist social and economic organisation. For Adkins, what characterises everyday life today is a logic of speculation whereby time is not standardised or regular but rather is non-chronological and functions in terms of uncertainty and constant revision. For example, discussing debt, Adkins challenges the usual understanding of its temporality as linear – as 'a promise to pay at a time that has not yet arrived, namely in the future' (2018: 83) – arguing that in a context whereby debt is prevalent across the global north, debt is not only an orientation to the future but is 'a fact of the

present that is difficult to ignore' (2018: 83). This point is important in showing how debt involves an intermingling of the future and present so that debt is not only an anticipation or orientation to the future but is also always in the present. It is also significant in its contrast to influential theoretical accounts of the time of debt as an emptying out of time, in that the future is already determined; what Maurizio Lazzarato (2011) describes as 'a strange sensation of living...without time' (Lazzarato 2011: 47, cited in Adkins 2018: 86). Adkins explains that this particular understanding of debt as emptying out time is based on a notion that debt requires regular, standardised payments by a steady and punctual subject (2018: 86-89)<sup>3</sup>. Whilst such a version of the time of debt may have been suitable for understanding the mid to late twentieth century, Adkins argues that twenty-first century debt is characterised by securitisation, which involves 'the transformation of assets via legal and financial instruments into liquid securities (including asset-backed securities) that can be sold and traded on financial markets' (2018: 7) and has become integrated into everyday life. Crucially, the time of debt has changed as securitisation has 'involved the reworking of the schedules of debt, that is the schedules of repayment' (Adkins 2018: 90). She goes on:

Specifically, rather than regular, steady and in sequence, securitisation has afforded the development of consumer finance and mortgage products whose repayment schedules, rather than being regular, steady, and in sequence, are variable, flexible and adjustable [...]. Repayment schedules may, for example, be sped up, slowed down, suspended, delayed, rescheduled, reset, restarted, reassembled, reorganised, and even reversed (Adkins 2018: 90).

According to Adkins, then, financial securitisation both generates a distinctive 'time' and must be understood in terms of time. Indeed, she argues that,

rather than emptying out, suspending or pre-empting time, or heralding an extension and intensification of the classical time of the time of debt, the time of securitised debt is one of intense activity in regard to time, a time in which presents, pasts, and futures and crucially their relations to each other are open to a constant state of revision: they may be drawn and redrawn, assembled and disassembled, set and reset. The speculative subject bound to the time of securitised debt is not a subject who mourns the loss of time or does not feel time, not is this a subject without a present or a future or without temporal orientation. On the contrary, this is a subject who must stand ready to adjust to recalibrations of pasts, presents, and futures, as well as to changes in the relations between and across these states (Adkins 2018: 98).

Adkins here begins to elaborate on how the time of securitised debt is experienced by subjects. 'Time' in this sense refers to economic, social and cultural processes and practices – the development of clock time and its role in establishing the foundations of capitalism, as Adam explores, or the ways in which this 'classical time' is reworked with contemporary operations of power as Adkins explores. An adjacent and overlapping set of literature to that which focuses on time has sought to examine what Sarah Sharma (2012) defines as *temporality*, or 'lived time'. The temporal is not a general sense of time particular to an epoch of history but a specific experience of time that is structured in specific political and economic contexts. The temporal operates as a form of social power and a type of social difference' (2021: 9). Arguing that 'the politics of time does not yet share a documented systematic record akin to that of the politics of space' (2012: 10), Sharma draws on Doreen Massey's (1994) influential concept of power-geometry, which examines how power is spatially and subjectively differentiated, to propose the concept of power-chronography; that is, how power functions temporally in the differentiation of embodied and subjective experience. Although with a different inflection, as with Adam and Adkins, Sharma challenges the significance of clock time, and especially of speedup, to explanations of social and cultural life. In

particular, she complicates the idea that clock time imposes synchronisation and standardisation in any straightforward or all-encompassing way, proposing instead the concept of recalibration:

The discourse of speed casts all individuals as extremely vulnerable, open to intervention. Shared across the temporal differential is not so much the general speed of life but rather the expectation that one must recalibrate. To recalibrate is to learn how to deal with time, be on top of one's time, to learn when to be fast and when to be slow. Recalibration [...] accounts for the multiple ways in which individuals and social groups synchronise their body clocks, their senses of the future or the present, to an exterior relation – be that another person, pace, technology, chronometer, institution, or ideology (2012: 18).

Sharma's concept of recalibration offers a means to examine how the relations between economic, social and cultural processes – 'the workaday world' for example, or global business flows – and lives as they are lived are temporally patterned and experienced. In particular, recalibration signals a certain kind of 'liveness' in that the ways in which individuals and social groups become synchronised with multiple technologies and temporalities is not necessarily pre-determined but is worked out, and re-worked, through specific relationalities. In this sense, as with Adkins' explanation of speculative debt, recalibration is a 'flexible, variable and adjustable' series of relations.

One example that Sharma explores of such recalibration is of the taxi-driver whose schedule is made and re-made to coincide with that of the international business man who travels for work. While quick or busy speed may be an important way in which the business traveller would describe their lives, for the taxi-driver, the situation is more convoluted; for perhaps long stretches they will wait for calls or hails while at other times their passenger will urge them to go faster. Another example is of the lunchtime yoga session held in the office buildings of large organisations, which Sharma



describes as a form of recalibration that ‘both uses the normalising day as an ostensible site of resistance while upholding it as the ultimate site of balancing work and life’ (2012: 141):

With the inclusion of yoga and spiritual healing in the workday, the desk worker is instructed to delve into “the power of now” in order to deal with the confining spatial and temporal arrangements of their nine-to-five lives. As for the mobile yoga instructors themselves, they “did their time” and are now released from the temporal and spatial confines of the workaday world. They become entrepreneurs of time control and exist to help others create the appropriate dispositions to live better lives within the temporal order of things (2012: 141).

Sharma’s exploration of the lunchtime yoga session, and especially how some of the yoga instructors she interviewed describe the temporality of the classes, has resonances with my concerns with mindfulness in this paper. As hinted at above, one of the ways in which yoga instructors explained their work was in terms of ‘doing their time’ within corporate workplaces; they valued their ability to temporarily move into these spaces and be released out of them again. Some of them also reflected on what they saw as the capacity of yoga to produce a temporality outside of linear clock-time. Kat, for example, explained that ‘Yoga expands the moment. That’s precisely what the classes in the office are about. They are about letting go and becoming present at a place where you aren’t often able to be present in your own life. When you become present there is an expansion of time and you come back to a place of stillness’ (cited in Sharma 2012: 93). While Sharma argues that lunchtime yoga sessions reinforce rather than undo the pressures of the 9-5 workplace, the yoga instructors’ attention to an elaboration of the present is nevertheless significant in terms of what they see as the demands of their clients’ workplace cultures, which are full, hectic and monotonous.

Sharma's work is important both for the emphasis that it places on temporality and for the concept of recalibration. In part, recalibration is defined by Sharma as a mode of affective labour in which 'the body is cast as central to the labouring process' (2012: 100) through disciplinary practices such as the lunchtime yoga classes, which 'can create an employee whose energy is boundless, endless, and shareable' (2012: 102). Sharma's interest in affect then, is with its role in disciplining bodies to recalibrate to the demands of corporate culture. While the concept of recalibration focuses attention on the relations between structure and agency, socio-economic processes and individual bodies, where affect is involved it functions as 'an intervention that is intended to lead individuals to accept structural conditions and make themselves responsible for their own well-being' (2012: 103). In the terms that I have set out above, structure determines individual actions in that individuals must recalibrate to the demands of neoliberalism.

An alternative – and in my view complementary – account of the affective relations between structures and individuals is developed by Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), in which she attends to the feeling of life as 'speed-up at work' and '[t]ime organised by the near future of the paying of bills and the management of children' (2011: 116). She

seeks out the historical sensorium that has developed belatedly since the fantasmatic part of the optimism about structural transformation realised less and less traction in the world. The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment (2011: 3).

As this quotation indicates, Berlant's concerns in the book share many features with the critiques of neoliberalism in that they are both concerned with 'structural transformation' and the conditions within which people live. Indeed, her interest is in similar issues to those that occupy Sharma's exploration of recalibration, and Adam's and Adkins' studies of the importance of time to the organisation and experience of contemporary socio-economic processes. However, Berlant's primary interest is with the affectivity of 'liberal-capitalist society'; with the socio-cultural as it is felt, experienced and lived out. For example, in 'track[ing] the emergence of a precarious public sphere', she understands this public sphere as 'an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering' (2011: 3). The emphasis here, then, is not on the public sphere as a structure into which individuals are fitted (or not) or which is determinative of their lives; rather it is composed of the circulation of scenarios and paradigms for living with and in the midst of precarity. This situation is conceptualised in terms of a scene, a genre, a situation, an atmosphere, a mood (Anderson 2016; Coleman 2016; Raynor 2017).

There is an important temporal element to Berlant's work. Indeed, her characterisation of cruel optimism is a detailed account of how attachments to the future are both necessary and destructive for subjects, and how liberal-capitalism today involves the fraying of the promises of and fantasies about the future. It is not quite that she argues that there is 'no future', but rather that the future as the site of a better life no longer holds. As such, she argues that the experience of 'the present' rather than the lure of the future, has become a central way in which contemporary life must be understood. One of the ways she theorises this condition is with her notion of the 'impasse'. 'Usually an "impasse" designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward', Berlant notes, but she adapts it to refer to,

a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event (Berlant 2011: 4).

The impasse, for Berlant, designates a contemporary situation that is 'at once intensely present and enigmatic'. It is not so much an impasse in its traditional definition, as this would imply that a situation should move forward, even if it isn't and can't. In contrast, Berlant's version of the impasse points to how the belief in a future – the good life – is wearing out, so that this 'stretch of time' is all or what there is – a 'stretched out present', a 'state of animated suspension', a 'holding pattern [...] suggest[ing] a temporary housing' as she also puts it (Berlant 2011: 5). The impasse is composed and lived out through what she terms 'temporal genres', or the ways in which '[a]djustments to the present are manifest not just in what we conventionally call genre, [...] but in more explicitly active habits, styles, and modes of responsivity' (2011: 20). These 'adjustments to the present' resonate with the idea of recalibration proposed by Sharma and Adkins in the sense of a kind of fine-tuning of the relations between time and temporality whereby the present becomes intensely felt. For Berlant, these adjustments work in terms of 'affective mediation' between 'the historical present as a back-formation' and 'everyday activity', procedures and practices of 'living on' (2011: 100). Importantly, and in distinction to Sharma's definition of recalibration, this affective mediation does not emanate from the historical present and determine everyday activity but is a relation through which they are both composed. Affective mediation thus has a double sense; it is between things and constitutive of those things that it is between. In this sense, as affective mediation, adjustments, relays and modulations are relations that co-constitute individuals and collectives, agency and structures. While I have highlighted the similarities and differences between Sharma's concept of

recalibration and Berlant's concepts of adjustments, relays and modulations, I draw on them both to continue to examine the presents of mindfulness.

### **Mindfulness and the present**

The proliferation of mindfulness has generated an emerging field of academic research publications, journalism and cultural commentary. Much has been written about its success in helping people to reduce their stress, anxiety and fears, develop compassion and improved dialogue, and acquire ways to counteract the distractions of digital media. Jon Kabot-Zinn, the American professor of medicine who is seen as popularising mindfulness through his self-help books and mindfulness centres, opens his 2012 book, *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment – and Your Life* – by writing that, 'you may very well be on the threshold of momentous shift in your life, something subtle and, at the same time, potentially huge and important' (2012: 1). Andy Puddicombe, the co-founder of the mindfulness app Headspace, says of mindfulness, 'I think more people should try meditation because who wouldn't want to feel less stressed, less overwhelmed, and less distracted? Who wouldn't want to experience more calm, more clarity, and more harmonious relationships in their life?' (in Sifferlin 2018). A mindfulness teacher and practitioner I recently interviewed said, 'it's a practice that's totally transformed my life, that's the first thing to say' (Dom).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given its increasing presence in daily life, mindfulness has also generated a number of sceptics. Most prominently, Ronald E. Purser (2019) describes its rollout in corporations, education and medicine, and its endorsement by celebrities and leading business figures as 'McMindfulness': 'nothing more than basic concentration training. Although derived from Buddhism, it's been stripped of the teachings on ethics that accompanied it, as well as the liberating aim of dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings' (2019: 8). While noting that '[r]educing suffering is a noble aim and it should be encouraged' (2019: 9) and that '[t]here are certainly worthy dimensions to mindfulness practice', Purser goes on:

What remains is a tool of self-discipline, disguised as self-help. Instead of setting practitioners free, it helps them adjust to the very conditions that caused their problems. A truly revolutionary movement would seek to overturn this dysfunctional system, but mindfulness only serves to reinforce its destructive logic. The neoliberal order has imposed its stealth in the past few decades, widening inequality in pursuit of corporate wealth. People are expected to adapt to what this model demands of them. Stress has been pathologized and privatised, and the burden of managing it outsourced to individuals. Hence the peddlers of mindfulness step in to save the day (2019: 8-9).

Others who are critical of the corporatisation of mindfulness include Zack Walsh (Walsh 2018) who notes that 'the capacity of secular mindfulness to enhance internal regulation, compliance, and individual responsibility enables it to effectively produce neoliberal subjects around these norms' (2018: 112). However, he goes on to argue that this intricate relationship between mindfulness and neoliberalism is not inevitable as it is possible to queer mindfulness. In particular, he proposes that while 'neoliberal political ontology celebrates the immediate present, and ignores the ways in which the present is socially and historically mediated' (2018: 117), queering mindfulness would make it possible for practitioners to '*recollect (sati)* neglected histories of systemic violence, which inform the continuing legacies of social and ecological injustice and they can reorient themselves around collective well-being by forming new habits and conditions that support the excluded and marginalised, not only as victims of ongoing violence, but as subjects whose well-being is constitutive of their own' (2018: 117).

While most writers note that mindfulness necessarily involves a focus on the present, a detailed account of what this present is, how it is experienced and valued by practitioners and why it is significant is mostly missing. Even in Walsh's argument, the specificity of the present that may be

opened beyond the individual to the collective is not remarked upon. According to Kabat-Zinn, 'mindfulness is *what arises when* you pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, and as if your life depended on it. And what arises is nothing other than awareness itself' (2012: 17, emphasis in original). Kabat-Zinn explains that the non-judgemental aspect of mindfulness 'is to be present for your experience *as it is* rather than immediately jumping in to change it or try to force it to be different' (2012: 26, emphasis in original). A definition of mindfulness provided on the Everyday Mindfulness website is that it 'is the awareness and approach to life that arises from paying attention on purpose, fully present, with curiosity and compassion' (Everyday Mindfulness website, 'What is mindfulness?' page)<sup>4</sup>. The NHS website describes mindfulness as '[p]aying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, and to the world around you – [which] can improve your mental wellbeing'<sup>5</sup>.

Mark Whitehead et al (Whitehead et al. 2016) unpack the 'beguilingly simple definition' of mindfulness as the non-judgemental awareness of the present:

The present-centred nature of mindfulness refers to the emphasis that the practice places on experiencing the world on a moment-by-moment basis. Mindfulness practices (including body scans, breathing exercises and mindful movements *inter alia*) focus on returning a dispersed consciousness back to the present. The dispersion of consciousness is expressed by any process (be it dwelling on past events, future planning, multiple task processing or dealing with troubling emotional responses), which deflect attention from the social and environmental particularities of present situations. Consequently, whether the dispersion of consciousness is a specific product of cognitive overelaboration, or the outcome of a more general process of chronic divided attention, mindfulness attempts to enable a more 'lucid awareness' of the here and now (Whitehead et al. 2016: 557).

An example of the development of ‘a more “lucid awareness” of the here and now’ is the exercise that routinely begins mindfulness courses; an eating meditation where the practitioner is encouraged to ‘let a raisin become the primary object of attention’, as Kabat-Zinn puts it in Track 1 of his guided practice (Kabat-Zinn 2012: 143). He writes:

The challenge in this guided meditation – and the beauty of it – is simply to be with each moment as it is: for the seeing, for the smelling, for the holding of the raisin in your hand, for feeling it with your fingers, for the anticipation of eating it and how that manifests in the body and in the mouth, for when it is taken into the mouth and how it is ‘received’, for the slow and deliberate chewing, for the tasting of it moment by moment and how it transforms with time, for the swallowing when the impulse to swallow arises and you respond to it, for all the thoughts and emotions that might arise at different points along the way, and for the extended aftermath of having swallowed it. All the while, the invitation is to be the knowing, to embody that which knows the experience as it is unfolding, and to rest in that awareness, moment by moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn 2012: 144).

Commenting on this particular exercise, Dom, a mindfulness teacher, reflects on the temporal experience of eating the raisin:

we always do an inquiry after each meditation where people are free to talk and share their experiences. Quite frequently, people say... they comment on the different sense of time that’s experienced during that exercise. So, time seems to slow down. While they’re focused on something to that degree, time just takes on a whole different quality.

So, the experience of normally eating a raisin would be you’re sitting around with your mates, there’s a World Cup game on, you’ve got nuts, raisins, beer and you’re just basically



shovelling food down without tasting it or even being aware that you're eating it, just constantly shovelling. That's one experience. Then, the slowing down is the sense of, 'Okay, just...'. Probably for the first time ever in your life, you're picking up a raisin, and you're looking at all the crevices, and you're holding it up to the light and you're seeing the dark bits, and the light bits, and the roundness of it and the sharp edges.

Here, 'being with' the raisin 'moment by moment' slows down time and generates an awareness of the present 'as it is unfolding'. Later on in the interview, Dom discusses how mindfulness meditation can create a temporal quality that differs to clock time:

sometimes, and talking to other meditators, this is not uncommon, where, yes, like, even a one hour meditation, the bell can go and they're convinced that the time is all wrong because it has felt like two minutes or it has felt like five minutes because you're so immersed in the experience, but, again, we come back to that sense of timelessness.

That, to me, is more a sense of timelessness than it is a sense of time slowing down because time can slow down in quite a luxurious way or it can slow down in a way that is almost impossible to be. When one is depressed, you know, like, hours can feel like days. It's a very subtle one, this, because it is, in some cases, about a sense of speeding up or a sense of slowing down, but I think more often than not, it's simply about a different quality of time and bordering on a sense of timelessness itself.

In other interviews, mindfulness practitioners have also discussed a kind of timelessness. For example, Angie, who explains her regular mindfulness practice as a way to stay grounded, says that mindfulness meditations 'can be described as if my surroundings have frozen still, like a still frame, and I am in the only one in "movement". I "step out" of it briefly to examine my placement and

choose how to best engage with it'. Dom noted in our interview that such an experience of mindfulness meditation was not experienced by all practitioners, and that it was not the goal of mindfulness to achieve such a state. He spoke about how '[m]indfulness is simply about being with whatever is arising, whether that's pleasant, unpleasant or something in between', and that 'this is one of the things I'm very careful to say at the start [of teaching a mindfulness course], which is we're not really here to get anywhere, this isn't about... we're not meditating to achieve a certain state. So, when we talk about some of the more extraordinary experiences you can have while meditating, I think it's very important to underline that that, in itself, is not the goal'. Other mindfulness practitioners I have interviewed have described mindfulness as becoming aware of 'what your body is doing and where you are, right now', as Rose, a mindfulness practitioner focused especially on teaching it to young people, put it, as being 'alert, [...] present, grounded, centred, concentrated', as Angie said, and as the ability to 'pause', 'reflect' and take 'time out' to avoid being on 'auto-pilot', as Bea, someone who had attended a mindful course for anxiety and returned to it to help them manage their feelings when needed, described. Beverley, who practised mindfulness daily following its use in her rehabilitation from a serious illness, explained that 'there's a vividness about the nowness of now' of mindfulness meditation. Talking about an interview with the dying playwright, Dennis Potter and Melvyn Bragg, she says:

He's sipping morphine. I mean, he's really ill. He talks about looking out of his window at the apple blossom and he says, 'And now it's the blossomest blossom it could ever be. It's so there'. That's what the nowness of now is like.

The times discussed by the participants here draw attention to the suppleness and flexibility of the mindfulness present. Focusing deliberately on 'the here and now' can involve a slowing down of the sense of time, so that the unfolding of the present 'moment by moment' becomes apparent. In this sense, the present might be understood as stretched out for as long as the exercise or a

practitioner's concentration lasts. The mindfulness present can also be a sense of timelessness, or losing a sense of clock time, so that the passing of two or five minutes in clock time feels 'all wrong' compared to the time experienced through being immersed in a meditation, as Dom puts it. Mindfulness meditation can also produce a sense of time being stilled so that it is only the body/self of the practitioner that is moving, whereby the present is somehow paused, enabling a distancing from and reflection on what is happening as it is happening. The mindfulness present can also be especially vivid or alert, suggesting that 'the nowness of now', as Beverley explains, is an intensive experience. What these various 'mindfulness presents' indicate, then, is that the temporal experience of the present is not stable, unified or coherent, but is multiple and diverse (Coleman forthcoming, 2017a). The mindfulness present is stretched and condensed, pulled and contracted so that the unfolding of the here and now can be both immediately and intensely experienced and drawn out and critically reflected upon.

### **Mindfulness presents, pasts and futures**

Some of the interviewees noted that one of the common misunderstandings of mindfulness that they encountered concerned the relationships between the present, past and future. That is, the cultivated focus on the present seems to imply that the past and future need to be somehow evacuated or eradicated. Beverley, for example, spoke of how, '[p]eople, when they start mindfulness, go "Well, that's ridiculous. That means I can't plan anything or I can't book a holiday"'. She goes on to explain, that 'There's nothing wrong with planning and there's nothing wrong with looking at the past or having good memories of things. [...] it's about that you're aware that that's what you're doing rather than your mind just going off on something in its own way'. The aim of bringing your mind back to what is happening, rather than letting it wander off, is core to mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn writes that 'you might imagine the energy of the thinking mind as the flowing of water in a stream or a great river. We can either be caught up in the stream and carried away by it, or we can sit on the bank and apprehend its various patterns with our eyes [...] and with

our ears' (Kabat-Zinn 2012: 37). A number of those I interviewed talked about this concentration on the present explicitly in terms of its relationship to the past and future. Rose described her mindfulness practice in terms of:

bringing my attention to that and noticing and questioning, gently challenging, 'What's that?' and what's caused it to do that? Noticing if I'm getting too attached to a particular narrative, or getting too anticipating anything, just letting go of the sense that I will ever know what will happen. Or, yes, just immediately being aware if I'm starting to ruminate on something to do with the past. For me, it's a kind of constant reminder.

Bea explained mindfulness as a 'refocusing' so that they became aware of how 'your body is in the present, right? I'm here at whatever it is at 12:20, but I'm thinking about tomorrow or I'm thinking about last night. And I guess just in terms of - You have, I guess, a limited number of days alive, right? And I guess you don't want to be spending all that time in the past or in the future, when you could be doing more shit now. Especially if it's inevitable'.

Noting that contemporary neuroscience theorises that the 'average person' has 76,500 thoughts a day, Dom comments:

So, typically, we're wired this way to be on edge, to always be thinking. Those 76,500 thoughts, very few of them are actually useful or practical, it's mostly just mental chatter, rumination, speculation, ruminating about the past, worrying about the future, as though any of that is going to make a difference. Ruminating on the past isn't going to change it, it's gone, you know, and the future is unwritten. So, mindfulness is a, sort of, antidote to that, mindfulness is saying, "Well, we don't have to live this way. We can simply notice the fact

that we're being swept away by our thoughts and come back to this, come back to our experience as we're living it".

Later, he notes that:

Probably the best example of that is with sticky thoughts. Unfortunately, most of our sticky thoughts tend to be the more negative thoughts. Happy thoughts just come and go, they're not a problem. The sticky thoughts are the self-judgements and revisiting painful incidents in our past and, equally, catastrophising the future, but once those thoughts are observed and once the nature of thinking is observed, that's really crucial, obviously, the nature of thinking, so noticing that...

For Dom here, then, the focus on the present that mindfulness fosters involves a noticing of how one can be 'swept away by our thoughts', and in particular by 'sticky thoughts'; those 'painful incidents in our past' that '[r]uminating on' won't be able to change, and 'worrying' or 'catastrophising the future', when the future 'is unwritten'. He goes on to say that in response to a question from a friend about whether he thinks about the future now, "Well, probably less now than I've ever done before." I don't really mind what happens next'.

Xu discussed taking their mindfulness practice more seriously following the death of their father, and now meditates twice a day. They also spoke of the mindfulness present in relation to the past and future, describing that '[w]hat had prevented me from being in the present was craving. Craving is any kind of liking, not liking, or being unsure of any sensation in the present'. Through mindfulness, they had become able to 'observe the craving that arises and let it go, mind becomes very joyful and energetic, relaxed, light, observant. Thoughts start to fade away, there isn't so much fighting with liking this or not liking that, everything just feels OK all the time. When I work or do

daily chores or interact with people like this, I'm very present, not having an internal monologue, debate or doubts. I very rarely worry about the future or have regrets about the past'.

A slightly different configuration of the mindfulness present, past and future is offered by Kabat-Zinn. While still emphasising the importance of the focus on the present, he proposes that this present is unavoidably connected to the past and future:

When it comes down to it, our entire past, whatever it has been, however much pain and suffering it has included, becomes the very platform for doing the work of inhabiting the present moment with awareness, equanimity, clarity, and caring. You need the past that you have; it is raw clay on the potter's wheel. It is both the work and the adventure of a lifetime not to be trapped in either our past or our ideas and concepts, but rather to reclaim the only moment we ever really have, which is always this one. Taking care of this moment can have a remarkable effect on the next one and therefore on the future – yours and the world's. If you can be mindful in this moment, it is possible for the next moment to be hugely and creatively different – because you are aware and not imposing anything on it in advance (2012: 16).

Kabat-Zinn's discussion here is primarily concentrated on the past, present and future of an individual; however, also in this extract is a consideration of the 'remarkable effect' that mindfulness might have on the future of the world.

Kabat-Zinn's framing of mindfulness here as a personal transformation that involves a recognition of the pain and suffering of the past and that may have a creative effect on the future may be critiqued, in the terms laid out above, for its implicit neoliberal leaning. Indeed, Walsh argues that Kabat-Zinn's approach is a paradigmatic example of McMindfulness and its role in the reproduction

of neoliberalism through the framing of mindfulness as a route to solve ‘innate individual failings’ rather than considering systemic processes and practices through which mental ill health, stress and anxiety, for example, are produced (2018: 115). At the same time, Walsh points out how the ‘back-and-forth dialog between critics and apologists [of mindfulness] has in many ways reached an impasse [in the classic, not Berlantian, sense], because it largely takes the form of a self-referential dialog that fails to break out of old habits and normative frameworks’ (2018: 115). While Walsh’s argument that mindfulness may be queered to create alternative relations between the present, past and future (as discussed above) and to ‘create[...] a new solidarity across difference’ (2018: 118), it does so within the economic and socio-political context of neoliberalism. Mindfulness might be queered, Walsh proposes, so that ‘neoliberalism’s ongoing privatisation of well-being would be reframed around the need to provide cultures and communities of well-being. Rather than remain resilient in the face of mounting stress, mindfulness would be reoriented around obtaining workplace justice as the precondition for safety and well-being’ (2018: 119). In this sense, similarly to what Sharma notes of the lunchtime yoga sessions, while mindfulness may reorient contemporary capitalist organisation, neoliberalism ‘acts as the starting point of analysis, is given a causal role, and becomes the dominant framing context’ (Anderson 2016: 737).

### **The presents of the present: Historical time and structures of feeling**

How then, as I asked above, might we conceive the relations between mindfulness and the socio-cultural worlds in which it becomes appealing, without one or the other becoming explanatory?

Returning to the relations between the *temporalities* of mindfulness and the *time* of contemporary liberal-capitalism is helpful here in considering the non-determinative connection between neoliberalism and mindfulness. It also helps to explicate further the significance of time and the temporal to contemporary economic, social and cultural life. Above, I discussed how recent work on time both emphasises large-scale processes and practices and argues that a classical understanding of time as steady, regular and/or linear is no longer appropriate to comprehend the functionings of

contemporary capitalism. Instead (or as well), the patterning of the relations between past, present and future are scrambled – through, for example, the instantaneity and simultaneity that Adam points to and/or the ways in which the relations between various times are, potentially, under constant revision, as Adkins details. Hence, rather than time being extensive – unfurling in a linear manner which can be spatially plotted – it is intensive – recursive, multiple, affective (Coleman 2012, 2014). Further, the emphasis on subjective experience that work on temporality highlights – the ways in which people feel and live with/live out time – also indicates something of this intensiveness, as people are involved in practices of recalibration where they adjust and synchronise to times and temporalities that may be other than what they feel to be their own, as Sharma explains.

If this is the case – if intensity is a defining feature of both time and the temporal – while time and temporality serve important heuristic purposes in that they focus on the macro and micro elements of the social world respectively, and it is not possible or desirable to fully separate them anyway, the ways in which they are theorised in terms of contemporary life suggests that they are becoming blurred; they both operate intensively. In this sense, the relations between time and the temporal are not so much determinative in that one or the other is explanatory of the other, but rather they are affective. More specifically, these intensive affective connections work through the present. For example, Adam notes how time-space compression works through instantaneity and simultaneity, and Adkins explores how the future of debt is brought into a present that might be variously stretched and condensed according to repayment demands. To return to the discussion of Sharma's work, in the sense that the lunchtime yoga sessions seek to enable practitioners to 'become present', they might be conceived as an attempt – successful or not – to recalibrate the relations between economic, social and cultural processes ('time'), and embodied and subjectively differentiated lives ('temporality').



They might also be understood in terms of Berlant's account of the 'present', which 'involves conceiving of a contemporary moment within that moment' (2011: 4). That is, 'the present' names the historical present, which is composed of a situation whereby time emerges and unfolds but not linearly, into a future. She argues that,

the present is perceived, first of all, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back. [...] If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters ('when did the present begin?') are also always there for debate (Berlant 2011: 4).

Berlant's point that the present is an affective experience that emerges 'first of all' to us, is helpful for understanding the mindfulness presents I've discussed. They are part of a 'temporal genre' where the present comes to be deliberately 'sensed and under constant revision'. However, the point about a 'temporal genre' is that it seeks to examine how the presents that are personal, individualised, are at once also collective. The temporal genre is the affective mediation of the individual and collective. Berlant's framing of the affective perception and experience of the present here as a way of somehow indicating a *collective* contemporary moment resonates with the work of Raymond Williams on structures of feeling (Williams 1977). Indeed, Berlant herself notes that 'affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and [...] bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves. This refraction of Raymond Williams' concept of the "structure of feeling" suggests that, whatever one argues about the subject as sovereign agent of history, affective responses may be said significantly to exemplify shared *historical time*' (2011: 15).

For Williams, a structure of feeling is a 'sense of a generation or of a period' (1977: 131). He makes this point as part of a longer argument concerned with the problematic rendering of the relationship between the individual subject and the social and cultural, where culture and society are made into 'fixed forms (1977: 129) and expressed in a 'habitual past tense' (1977: 128) and the personal or subjective is seen as 'this, here, now, alive, active' (1977: 128). Williams finds this formulation problematic because it separates out the subjective and the social and cultural and because he sees society and culture as well as the subjective as active, live and alive. Indeed, his development of the concept of a structure of feeling is intended to account for what he calls the 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present' (1977: 128). He defines a structure of feeling as:

a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations between and within classes are again an open question: that is say, a set of specific historical questions (1977a: 131).

Central to what helps with the identification of the specific historical questions that define a structure of feeling is what Williams terms 'pre-emergence'. Williams argues that culture is always changing, or emergent – 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created' (1977: 123). He augments an understanding of emergent culture as 'immediate practice' with that of pre-emergence; that which is 'active and pressing but not yet fully articulated' (1977: 126), arguing that we need to 'understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence [...] to explore the concept of structures of feeling' (1977: 126-127).

What helps to designate a structure of feeling as *'a sense of a generation or period'* is that which is in the process of emerging.

As I noted above, Berlant argues that 'the structure of an affect has no inevitable relation to the penumbra of emotions that may cluster in the wake of its activity, nor should it' (Berlant 2008: 4). There are thus no predetermined or necessary relations between structure and agency, neoliberalism and mindfulness. Taking this observation seriously, can mindfulness, and in particular the presents it can create, be understood as a contemporary structure of feeling? Put slightly differently, is a mindfulness present an instance of today's historical present? In exploring these questions, returning to Berlant's point about 'conceiving of a contemporary moment within that moment' (2011: 4) is helpful in thinking both about the specific presents of mindfulness and what these might tell us about the contemporary present.

The mindfulness presents I have explored above might, for example, be understood in terms of what Williams' refers to as the pre-emergent. They are explicitly described as that which is unfolding 'moment to moment' and as an often intense or vibrant experience that is difficult to articulate. While there are parameters to the present – it is not getting carried away with the past or the future – it is also seen as live/alive and stretched out. Furthermore, Berlant's explanation of the present as both an 'absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance' might be a way of conceiving the requirement of mindfulness to attend to and become aware of what's happening now as well as to monitor how this focus may go astray or unravel. In our interview, for example, Rose frequently talked of the importance of 'coming back to the breath' when she felt her mind becoming crowded by too many thoughts, and Bea of the importance of becoming aware of her mind focusing on what she had said yesterday or has to do later today, tomorrow or next week. The aim of mindfulness is to become alert to that which disrupts the possibility of becoming absorbed in the moment. Indeed, Bea spoke about how through initially practising mindfulness formally in dedicated meditations, she now

practices mindfulness informally as it has become an integral part of her life. In this sense, an ‘absorptive awareness’ of the present has become an embodied habit. Dom also spoke of how ‘the biggest difference [mindfulness] has made to me is that I now live in a state not of anxiety, and depression and unease, but in a state of almost constant quiet joy’.

My proposal is not so grand as to claim that these mindfulness presents in themselves indicate a structure of feeling; rather, I see them as one instance of a wider series of deliberately cultivated temporal experiences that might compose today’s historical present. In so doing, I am drawing through the two-fold understanding of ‘the present’ in how Williams and Berlant conceive of a structure of feeling – as that which is emergent, pre-emergent or in the process of settling, and as that which designates the sense of a generation or period. Berlant draws attention to how ‘an emergent historical environment [...] can be sensed atmospherically, collectively’ (2008: 5) and argues that what makes ‘a historical present and not just everydayness’ is how:

the atmosphere suggests a shift of historical proportions in the terms and processes of the conditions of continuity of life. Norms and intuitions feel off: a sensed perturbation of world-shaping dimensions impels recasting the projected impact of small and large gestures, noticings, impulses, moments. The reinvention of life from disturbance reemerges in cadences, rhythms, the smallest predictables. To change one’s intuitions about it all is to challenge the habituated processing of affective responses to what one encounters in the world. In this kind of situation a process will eventually appear momentarily as form – as episode, event, or epoch. How that happens, though, will be determined processually, by what people do to reshape themselves and it while living in the stretched out ‘now’ that is at once intimate and estranged (2008: 5).

In small ways that can nevertheless be transformative for people, mindfulness might be understood as an affective response to their encounters with the world. Mindfulness explicitly promises a recalibration of the relations between individual and world – as it is practiced both formally and informally it unfolds as ‘cadences’, ‘rhythms’, ‘gestures’, ‘noticings’ that remodulates how people feel, experience and live. My suggestion is that while not determinative, mindfulness emerges and gains traction at a time when liberal-capitalism in the global north is burning out – for people, for existing social, economic and political structures, and for the planet. Melissa Gregg (2018), writing about the prevalence of discourses about and practices of productivity within corporate culture, sees various manifestations of mindfulness within these very corporate cultures as ‘mark[ing] something of a limit point or moment of exhaustion for worker’s struggling to meet the imperative of time management in the transformed surroundings of the contemporary workplace’ (2018: 104-5). In a similar way to how Sharma describes the lunchtime yoga sessions, mindfulness is part of a range of products and practices to ‘satisfy the desire for a form of punctuation from social labours that lack obvious temporal constraints’ (2018: 104). Some of those I interviewed talked about their routes to mindfulness being through feelings of anxiety and mental and/or physical health breakdowns (e.g. Dom, Rose, Bea, Beverley).

Taking into consideration the relations between the *temporalities* of mindfulness and the *time* of contemporary liberal-capitalism helps to understand them as a series of affective modulations or relays, where the situation produced is not quite determinative, not quite explanatory but is affectively connected. What such an approach might offer to understandings of mindfulness and of neoliberalism or contemporary liberal-capitalism is the importance of exploring time and especially presents to today’s experiences and embodiments. My argument is that mindfulness is both an experience that is present-focused and emergent and that this emergence and focus on the present is characteristic of the sense of daily life today. That is, the temporality of the present is part of what

might identify a structure of feeling today. The presents of the present become a means of examining how people feel and live with structures in embodied and experiential ways.

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews are part of a larger project called 'Mediating Presents: Producing the Now in Contemporary Digital Culture, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. To date, I have interviewed forty-four people, including eight mindfulness practitioners.

<sup>2</sup> See also Thrift (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Adkins notes that 'financial institutions and their intermediaries have found a particularly reliable source of such steadiness and punctuality in the female subject' (2018: 87), thus drawing attention to the gendered aspects of debt and subjectivity (see also Coleman 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/what-is-mindfulness-2/> Last accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/>, Last on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019.