

Perceptions of Mindfulness Among Public Relations Professionals and Students: Similarities, Differences, and Implications for Undergraduate Career Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness has been studied in many professional and educational environments but not in the public relations workplace. This exploratory study framed in the context of social order uses the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) to separately determine perceptions of mindfulness by public relations professionals and undergraduates preparing for PR careers. Results show professionals and students have strikingly similar perceptions about their work environments. Widespread conceptual clarity about mindfulness was noted. Professionals and undergraduates reported the highest perceptions of mindful awareness in the same four workplace action or response areas. Low perceptions of mindful awareness aligned in three of four lowest-ranked areas. Strong similarities were noted in stressors present in the professional and academic workplaces. Findings support the value of mindfulness intervention in PR career preparation. Recommendations are offered for PR educators, along with suggestions for future scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: mindfulness, public relations, workplace stress, PR education, career preparation

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Whether it's mindlessly consuming sugary snacks while working, forgetting a new client's name immediately after being introduced, or fretting over expected criticism from a co-worker, mindfulness in the workplace is an important and understudied issue. Mindfulness should concern public relations professionals as well as those who are preparing undergraduates to enter the profession.

A lack of mindfulness at work can result from—and can at the same time generate—anxiety, guilt, frustration, condemnation and self-doubt (Carroll, 2006). Ultimately, though, what underlies an absence of mindful action is a worker's inability to focus and create a thoughtful and positive outcome from a current-moment situation (Kabat-Zinn, 2001).

Mindfulness has been shown to be valuable in any workplace (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017; Passmore, 2019). It would seem especially relevant in public relations, where professionals work at a fast pace and are expected to generate strategic and creative ideas to build mutual understanding and influence between stakeholders, clients, and colleagues.

This article addresses the extent to which PR professionals and young adults seeking to enter the field understand and act mindfully—remaining thoughtful and calm in the present moment while responding in disciplined, ethical, and beneficial ways. This article presents the results of an exploratory study of PR professionals and junior/senior-level undergraduates planning for public relations careers. Specifically, the study found that there is a widespread, correct understanding of what mindfulness means in a work context. PR professionals and students reported the same kinds of work-related stressors and frustrations. Professionals and students reported their personal perceptions of mindfulness strengths and weaknesses in much the same way. At the same time, half of the professionals and a strong majority of undergraduates did not perceive mindfulness to be relevant to public relations work. Respondents reported almost no systematic mindfulness intervention in

either the professional or academic environment. In other professions and in other academic workplaces, mindfulness interventions have been applied successfully over many years to help people cope with anxiety and stress (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017), but the literature reveals no such effort in public relations.

The purpose of this study is to explore how public relations professionals and undergraduates preparing to enter the field would respond when asked questions about their perceived level of mindfulness at work. Having an understanding of how PR professionals and students grasp their level of mindfulness might lead to more awareness of how to work effectively among today's professionals and those being prepared for the field in the future.

Literature Review

The selection and use of survey instruments and the review of resulting findings was guided by the theoretical construct of social order. In a socially ordered workplace, workers would “share power responsibly, communicate clearly, and work productively together no matter what cultural, economic, social, or technological uncertainties may develop” (Swanson, 2012, p. 134).

Mindfulness as a Concept

Mindfulness is prominent in popular culture. Entertainers, celebrities, and talk show hosts proclaim its calming power (Meola, 2019; Sidelsky, 2011). Professional athletes and coaches credit mindfulness as key to their winning performance (Patel, 2018). Movies and television programs present mindfulness as a life-changing experience (Kost, 2020; Pickert, 2014).

Mindfulness has been interpreted many ways. At its most basic, it involves “being awake and aware—being tuned in to yourself, to others, and to the environment” (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012, p. 4). Mindfulness practice has been called “a time-tested antidote to operating in autopilot”

(Levasseur, 2012, para. 11). Mindfulness means being rooted in the present moment, open to new ideas, and liberated from anxiety, frustration, and self-condemnation (Langer, 1989). Mindfulness means focusing on the processes of life and work more so than the outcome (Serafin, 2007). One of the most popular mindfulness interventions is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a secular practice created in 1979 by physician Jon Kabat-Zinn. MBSR trains participants to detach from their stress, live calmly, and avoid the mental tyranny created by past regrets and future worries (Kabat-Zinn, 2001).

Although mindfulness is not a religious practice, beginning in the late 1960s, its growth in popular culture was fostered by the Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, and Thich Nhat Hanh. These and other ordained Buddhist teachers advocated mindfulness as a response to the stresses of Western life. Today, at least 14% of American adults profess to use some type of mindfulness practice (Norton, 2018).

Mindfulness is not defined as health care. Still, many advocates claim health benefits and much of the current scholarship focuses on a link to physical health. Some recent clinical studies have demonstrated mindfulness to be effective in counteracting obesity (Caldwell et al., 2012) and diminishing the propensity for alcohol and drug abuse (Wupperman et al., 2012). One study involving MBSR documents its efficacy in reducing the health risks associated with loud noise in the environment (Hede, 2017). Australian health care researchers Mars and Oliver (2016) believe maintaining a state of mindfulness allows the human body to heal itself, thus leading to a variety of personal benefits and potential “sustainability of the health care system” (p. 7).

Mindfulness can be looked at in two ways. *Trait mindfulness* is evidenced as an aspect of a person’s disposition (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). In that sense, it is associated with personality rather than intentional effort and does not exhibit change due to situational context. *State*

mindfulness is evidenced when a person intentionally cultivates a mindful approach to a perceived challenge. Absent of any challenge, the person's level of mindful awareness may vary (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016).

It is believed that most people “will have a stable level of trait mindfulness and altering levels of state mindfulness” (Mahmood et al., 2016, para. 4). Participation in a single mindfulness exercise was shown to increase a level of state mindfulness (Luberto & McLeish, 2018). Regardless of whether an individual's level of mindfulness fluctuates or is relatively consistent, in a busy and distracted world, even a slight improvement in mindful attention helps a person to be a more focused and attentive communicator (O'Hara, 2013).

Mindfulness at Work

The quest to learn about, practice, and study the effects of mindfulness has reached the workplace. Mindfulness at work is about critical thinking and not simply about gaining more knowledge (Langer, 1989). A key precept is the idea that all elements of existence are interrelated, or as Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel (2011) described it, “We cannot find a true boundary or edge to any thing, because all things exist in dependence on other things” (p. 34).

Case study literature documents systematic mindfulness intervention targeting a variety of professionals including athletes (Mehrsafar et al., 2019), auditors (Herda et al., 2019), chemical company workers (Aikens et al., 2014), law school students (Reuben & Sheldon, 2019), nurses (Bazarko et al., 2013; Montanari et al., 2019), and real estate agents (Byrne & Thatchenkery, 2019). Mindfulness interest is especially prominent in the corporate sector. Almost a quarter of all Fortune 500 companies have used mindfulness intervention to reduce workplace anxiety and stress (Wolever et al., 2018). Important questions about workplace mindfulness intervention have been proposed (Castille et al., 2015) and answered (Brown et al., 2007; Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017).

Mindfulness in Education

The quest to learn about, practice, and study the effects of mindfulness has also reached the educational sector. Worldwide, a growing body of literature includes thousands of case studies that document mindful thinking and action by students in pre-kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms (see Semple et al., 2017). Mindfulness intervention has been implemented at the institutional or “whole school” level (Sheinman et al., 2018), as well as at the classroom level (Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Viafora et al., 2015).

In 2007, Richard Burnett and Chris Cullen initiated the Mindfulness in Schools Project to encourage and support the teaching of secular mindfulness in schools (The Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2020). This effort and others have shown mindfulness has great potential to improve student performance “because of its effectiveness in reducing emotional distress and promoting emotional balance, improving attention, and contributing to motivated learning” (Broderick, 2013, para. 9).

The body of literature also offers numerous books and case studies that address mindfulness as a component of teacher preparation (Haynes et al., 2013; Rechtschaffen, 2016). A successful mindful intervention begins with the educator becoming conceptually proficient and then carefully considering how to integrate mindfulness with the institution, curriculum, students, and intended learning outcomes (Hanh & Ware, 2017).

Best Practices for Mindfulness in Education

Many different secular mindfulness intervention strategies have been developed and implemented in academic environments. As with any pedagogical element, mindfulness intervention in higher education must be adapted to the institution, the academic program, the specific curriculum and desired learning outcomes, the students, and the social and cultural norms they identify with. A review of recent case studies of mindfulness intervention in different professional and academic contexts

suggests the following best practices.

Educator Preparation. Mindfulness intervention should only be undertaken when an educator is interested in it, believes in its relevance to learning, and is trained to conduct intervention in the academic environment (Haynes et al., 2013). Training can take months or years and can be expensive. A high level of commitment would be required. An essential element of that training for the educator is the ability to imagine the transformation that mindfulness intervention will bring about in themselves and with their students (Rechtschaffen, 2016).

Mindfulness intervention tends to be a subjective and qualitative intervention and, as such, may be easier to introduce and carry out within the culture and social order of a liberal arts campus than within the culture and social order of a research-based university (Lee, 2012). As with anything presented to students, there is a chance a mindfulness intervention might not go according to plan. Therefore, the educator should be flexible and accommodating (Hanh & Ware, 2017).

Desirable Outcomes. There are many methods for mindfulness intervention. Each has its own structural advantages and disadvantages. Each has the potential for different types of outcomes. The educator should be clear on what is needed in the particular situation so that the most appropriate intervention strategy can be planned. There is strong support for the idea that mindfulness intervention should not be attempted simply to improve productivity. It should allow educators “a more wakeful and authentic way of being with students and colleagues” (Brendel & Cornett-Murtada, 2019, p. 20) and should address the emotional, social, and moral development of all who participate (Hyland, 2017). In that way, intervention would strengthen the social order of the academic workplace.

Intervention Structure. The educator planning a mindfulness intervention should carefully study a variety of established approaches (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011). Mindfulness intervention is never a one-

size-fits-all response to classroom problems. Each educator must take care to select, plan, and execute an intervention that is right for the situation. Any intervention should ease the burden on students and not add to it.

Some interventions actively teach meditation as the foundation of mindfulness. Others include elements of cognitive behavioral therapy (Kumar et al., 2017). Some engage participants in mental exercises, including self-observation to bring about clarity and focus (Hayes, n.d.). Some interventions include yoga, walking meditation, or other physical activities to promote mindfulness through awareness of movement and breathing (Faizer, 2017).

One mindfulness intervention focuses simply around a set of eight questions (Passmore, 2019). In asking themselves these questions, students of the Henley Reflective Method have the opportunity to develop a higher level of mindfulness about business interactions of the past and opportunities of the future:

1. What have you observed?
2. How did you respond (think about your behavior, your emotions and your thoughts)?
3. What does that tell you about you as a person (your beliefs and assumptions)?
4. What does that tell you about you as a leader (your beliefs and assumptions about others)?
5. What strengths (advantages) do these offer?
6. What pitfalls (disadvantages) do these offer?
7. How might you respond differently next time?
8. What did you learn about yourself, the person and the situation?

(pp. 167-168)

Regardless of the intervention used, it is advisable to structure it around a specific set of focal points. This will resonate well with Generation Z students who seek to align their performance with defined outcomes

(Castellano, 2016).

Mindfulness intervention does not need to take time away from in-seat instruction. Cotler and colleagues (2017) presented results of a 2015 mindfulness intervention delivered online at a small liberal arts college. The online intervention brought about improvement in undergraduates' emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and emotional detection (Cotler et al., 2017). One newly published case study focusing on teaching mindfulness to journalism students reports that educators intending an intervention "must walk the methodological tightrope" (Pearson et al., 2018, p. 197).

Protection of Students' Rights. Students subjected to mindfulness intervention should always be fully informed about the concept, intervention structure, and desired outcomes. Students should always have the freedom to opt out (Haynes et al., 2013). The relevance to career preparation should be explained clearly. If the mindfulness intervention includes religious overtones brought about through chanting, singing, or study of ancient texts, participants may judge the effort to be for the purpose of proselytizing and be offensive and inappropriate in an educational context (Pearson et al., 2018).

Mindfulness intervention is undertaken to improve student awareness of self, the work environment, and the needs and feelings of others in the environment. It should bring a heightened sensitivity and, at the same time, a sense of poise. When carrying out a mindfulness intervention with students, the educator should be cautious to avoid opening up any deeper psychological issues of a participant in a classroom situation.

Assessing Impact. As with any effort to build student learning and career readiness, the results of mindfulness intervention should be assessed. There should be an unquestionable improvement in readiness for work, and that improvement should be directly attributable to the

intervention (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017). Development of an assessment plan should be undertaken side-by-side with the development of any mindfulness intervention. A benchmark for student performance should be established. Direct or indirect measures of student performance should be taken and compared to the benchmark. Results should lead to a closing-the-loop discussion about the impact of mindfulness intervention on student learning.

Mindfulness in PR Practice and Career Preparation

An introductory statement on a website presenting communications/media career opportunities to undergraduates offers a glamorous view of public relations and similar occupations:

Working right in the center of the action can come with a major adrenaline rush If you long for the kind of job that puts you in the spotlight, one of these careers could be just what you're looking for. (Lee, 2020, para. 27)

It is true that public relations is a media-related field allowing unique creative expression, sometimes in exotic locales while utilizing the most modern technology. Society's desire to communicate is insatiable, and as a result, PR has expanded its reach and influence even in the most difficult economic times (Witmer & Swanson, 2020). But the public relations profession is undergoing unprecedented change, and working in it brings both highs and lows (Jiang & Shen, 2013).

The public relations workplace can be volatile and unpredictable as a consequence of technological advancement and new marketplace pressures (Arenstein, 2019). Entire agency structures have been torn down and rebuilt (Barrett, 2011). Increased international competitiveness brings questions about ethical and technical practice, and even uncertainty about the words used to define public relations contrast with other media specialties (Drabicky, 2019; Elliott, 2012; Jeong, 2011). Any public relations professional ill-equipped for the new realities can be put out of

work suddenly and without warning (Sweeney, 2010; Woloshin, 2009). The job of “PR executive” is ranked among the 10 most stressful in the workplace (Carufel, 2019). As a result of changing realities of public relations, its workplace roles, expectations and essential skills, PR professionals often struggle to remain resilient (Guo & Anderson, 2018; Jiang & Shen, 2013).

Undergraduates training for a public relations career may do so in one of more than 400 higher education programs (Gotlieb et al., 2017). But as within the professional workplace, there are unique volatilities and unresolved challenges within academe (Lombardi, 2013). Today’s undergraduates often feel anxious and alienated (Soni, 2019). The U.S. higher education system has shouldered billions of dollars in funding reductions (Marcus, 2019). Reductions have been offset by program cuts, consolidations, and tuition increases (Mitchell et al., 2018). It may be difficult for PR students to look for immediate financial gain after graduation, as many PR jobs offer entry-level salaries as low as \$30,000 a year (Lau, n.d.). These factors may lead to stress on a new PR practitioner.

Changing interests and perceptions of students can hinder educators’ abilities to present essential workplace concepts (Crawford et al., 2013). The arrival of Generation Z, today’s largest student cohort, has broadened this challenge (Tulgan, 2015). Gen Z students have been characterized as distracted communicators with “less-than-stellar organizational skills, productivity, follow-through, and timeliness” (Castellano, 2016, p. 18). Gen Z college graduates may not have mastered the soft skills employers most demand from entry-level workers (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Gen Z’s emotional development and potential for successful transfer to the workplace may also be inhibited by well-meaning but overbearing “helicopter parents” (Hunt, 2008; Schiffrin et al., 2013).

These and other issues result in higher education faculty perceiving

insufficient time or resources to stay current in their discipline (Gose, 2010; Grasser, 2013; Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018). Faculty tell of a growing bureaucracy that demands expending up to a third of work time on duties unrelated to the classroom (Flaherty, 2014). PR educators in particular face a daunting set of curricular recommendations that even the largest and most resource-rich programs may struggle to meet (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

Higher education institutions routinely fail to prepare educators for these and other workplace challenges (Perlmutter, 2017). The resulting stresses ultimately lead to anxiety, diminished expectations, and depressed morale (Capaldi, 2011). Since public relations professionals face unprecedented cultural, economic, organizational, and technological change (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2019), mindfulness intervention is relevant to the public relations workplace. Since undergraduate students face many stresses on the path to a degree and career, it would seem that mindfulness intervention is equally relevant to public relations education. But there exists no confirmation of awareness of mindfulness among public relations practitioners or students planning for public relations careers. There is a need for research documenting mindfulness intervention in public relations workplaces and classrooms.

Theoretical Framework for Mindful Action

The public relations profession and the higher education system that prepares undergraduates for careers in PR and media are both experiencing rapid transformational change (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). This change can be a source of great anxiety for the people involved. Therefore, the theoretical construct of social order (Eisenstadt, 1992) seems especially relevant to frame this inquiry of mindfulness in public relations.

A socially ordered workplace has a clear division of labor, established trust among workers, regulation of power for decision-

making, and institutional systems that legitimize activity (Eisenstadt, 1992). Communication in the socially ordered workplace would focus on communicating meaningful intent (Alexander, 1992). These attributes would allow the socially ordered workplace to be inherently mindful. A focused attention to reality “without the distractions and consultations the intellect contrives” (Richo, 2005, p. 94) would also be consistent with a socially ordered workplace.

In contrast, a workplace without systematic mindfulness intervention could inculcate distracted behavior. It would be a workplace with more focus on doing than being. In this mindless workplace, workers would be unable to see the correlation between otherwise disconnected phenomena. There would be excessive reliance on “categories and distinctions created in the past” that separate rather than unite (Langer, 1989, p. 11). Workers could easily make assumptions and take actions that are “not so smart” (McRaney, 2011, p. 7). A workplace where mindless behaviors are commonplace would be a workplace in disorder.

Research Questions

This exploratory study sought to fill an obvious gap in the scholarly literature in public relations by determining the extent to which PR professionals and undergraduates planning for public relations careers were aware of mindfulness as a concept. It was important to identify the extent to which mindfulness was perceived and applied as a coping strategy, and what similarities and differences existed between professionals and students. An important goal of the work was the development of recommendations for mindful intervention that could allow educators to better equip undergraduates for the realities of a public relations career. The following research questions were investigated:

RQ1: How is the concept of mindfulness defined and its workplace relevance explained by public relations professionals and undergraduates preparing to enter the profession?

RQ2: Through completion of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, what similarities and differences will be noted among the perceptions of workplace interactions of public relations professionals and undergraduates preparing to enter the profession?

Method

This study was primarily qualitative in its focus and outcomes. The section below lays out the procedures undertaken for collecting and analyzing data on perceptions of mindfulness among public relations professionals and undergraduates.

Assessing Perceptions of Mindfulness

Many instruments have been created to assess mindfulness. The proliferation of different scales can make mindfulness a difficult construct to understand (Hyland, 2017). The Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) is a simple psychometric assessment developed by social psychologist Kirk Warren Brown and clinical psychologist Richard M. Ryan (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The MAAS allows tracking of a subject's attention and response to situations in the environment (Brown et al., 2011). The MAAS has been characterized as "a valid, reliable and stable factor structure of mindfulness measure" (Phang et al., 2016, p. 313). It has been used in a number of different workplace contexts and is the most frequently cited instrument to measure self-report of mindfulness (Wong et al., 2018).

This exploratory study involved independent administration of the MAAS to professionals and to undergraduate PR students to identify similarities and differences in perceived reactions to common workplace scenarios. The MAAS was chosen due to its brevity and the need for only minimal semantic adjustment to be relevant in the context of public relations. The study was concerned with respondents' general perceptions and did not attempt to distinguish between trait and state mindfulness.

Populations for Study

The Public Relations Society of America is recognized as the preeminent professional association for public relations professionals in the U.S. Therefore, PRSA members were identified as the first of the two populations for study. A stratified random sampling was conducted of PRSA members from all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The sample was composed of members who identified in the association's membership directory as engaged in agency, corporate, nonprofit, or independent practitioner work. Retired practitioners and educators were excluded.

Students were recruited through their affiliations with student-run PR agencies, which offer concept and skill learning with a real-world focus and are recognized as a rigorous career preparation experience for undergraduates (Bush et al., 2017; Bush & Miller, 2011; Kim, 2015). Fewer than 5% of universities have the resources to successfully launch and manage an agency, and the vast majority of agencies are in the United States (Swanson, 2017). Given the likelihood that agency students were already receiving optimal preparation for the public relations workplace, undergraduates studying in student-run agencies in the U.S. were identified as the second population for study.

Data Collection

Data collection was accomplished via two 25-item questionnaires, one for professionals and the other for students. The 15-item MAAS instrument comprised the core of each questionnaire, as shown in the appendix. Some MAAS item wording was altered slightly to align with public relations workplace terminology. Data collection took place via an anonymous online survey administered over a four-month period in late 2018.

The questionnaire for professionals included 10 items inquiring

about workplace role and industry experience. The questionnaire for students included 10 items inquiring about length of student agency experience, time to degree completion, and career expectations.

Questionnaires allowed open-ended answers, consistent with previous research (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017; Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016) but did not ask respondents to identify themselves or their employer/student agency.

Participants and Response Rates

Five hundred PRSA member professionals with email addresses listed in the association directory were individually sent survey invitations via email. A reminder message was sent within one week to all who had not responded. In a six-week period, 57 responses (11%) were received.

Because undergraduates could not be contacted independently to solicit participation, a convenience sample of students working in student-run agencies was conducted with the assistance of agency advisers. An explanation of the research effort and a link to the online questionnaire was provided to 45 advisers identified through their engagement in conferences or on social media. Twenty-six advisers agreed to disseminate the questionnaire link to include their students in the survey population. Not all advisers provided enrollment data as requested. The inquiry yielded 81 student responses over a six-week period.

Data Analysis

The inability to randomly identify and independently solicit survey participation from students prevented a statistical comparison between the data collected in the two surveys. Instead, responses were tallied in percentages, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Each of the 15 MAAS questions presented a statement about some common action or response of the public relations workplace, as shown in Table 1. Responses of “Almost Always,” “Very Frequently,” and “Somewhat Frequently” were collapsed during data analysis to result in a summary percentage score for “Frequently or Always Mindful.” Responses of “Somewhat Infrequently,” “Very

Infrequently,” and “Almost Never” were collapsed during data analysis to result in a summary percentage score for “Infrequently or Almost Never Mindful.” Comments offered by respondents were reviewed for topic and thematic consistency. Some examples are offered below.

Results

Nearly all PRSA member professionals were college degree holders (bachelor’s degree, 57%; master’s degree, 42%). One in three respondents reported attainment of APR or College of Fellows designation. More than 80% of professionals reported 11 or more years in PR or a closely related field. Work environments reported included nonprofit (24%), agency (15%), corporate (15%), education (14%), government or military (10%), medical (3%), independent practice (3%) and others (12%), including travel and financial services.

With regard to student participants, nearly all respondents (91%) reported more than three years of collegiate experience, and 83% planned degree completion within the year. When asked their first choice for a career, students chose public relations (46%), advertising (32%), marketing (7%), social media (2%), telecommunications (2%), or other (8%), including sales and event planning. When asked about their student agency involvement, 55% reported being new to the agency experience and 48% reported two or more academic terms of involvement. Respondents indicated a variety of work focus among student agencies, including public relations (31%), social media (26%), advertising (23%), marketing (11%), and other (9%), including videography and media relations.

Mindfulness Defined

Regarding RQ1 about how the concept of mindfulness is defined, a large majority of PR professionals (98%) and undergraduate students (93%) reported familiarity with mindfulness as a term. Respondents then indicated agreement with one or more of 11 possible definitions of

mindfulness, as shown in Table 1. When asked if mindfulness was relevant to public relations work, 50% of professionals answered in the affirmative. Among undergraduate respondents, 24% answered in the affirmative. When asked if their workplace was a mindful place, 36% of professionals responded yes, 38% responded no, and 25% were unsure. When asked if their student agency was a mindful place, 53% of undergraduates responded yes, 21% responded no, and 25% were unsure. Professionals provided 42 comments elaborating on their perception of mindfulness in the workplace. Undergraduates provided 39 comments elaborating on their perception of mindfulness in the student agency workplace. Selected comments are shown in Figure 2.

Mindful Attention Awareness Scale

For RQ2, which asked about the similarities and differences between professionals' and undergraduates' views of workplace interactions, both professionals and students reported the highest perceptions of mindful awareness in the same four workplace action or response areas (see Table 2). Low perceptions of mindful awareness by both PR professionals and students were in alignment in three of the four lowest-ranked areas.

PR professionals reported the highest perceptions of mindful awareness in the action or response areas of physical movement (96%), attentiveness to belongings (94%), pace of activity (90%), and multitasking (83%). PR professionals reported the lowest perceptions of mindful awareness in the action or response areas of short-term memory recall (56%), inattentive listening (e.g., forgetting a person's name shortly after hearing it) (52%), physical tension or discomfort (38%), and emotional response (38%).

Undergraduates reported the highest perceptions of mindful awareness in the action or response areas of attentiveness to belongings (93%), physical movement (90%), multitasking (85%), and pace of

activity (84%). Undergraduates reported the lowest perceptions of mindful awareness in the action or response areas of inattentive listening (54%), mental preoccupation (44%), short-term memory recall (30%), and emotional response (25%).

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study document that PR professionals and undergraduates are familiar with mindfulness as a concept. Most respondents reported that mindfulness is related to presence in the moment and that it has links to productivity and meditation. Few professionals and students agreed with grossly inaccurate characterizations of mindfulness—that it is about fixing something wrong with you, suppressing bad feelings, or is some form of disguised Buddhism. But only half of the professionals and just 24% of undergraduates indicated a relevant connection between mindfulness and public relations work.

Respondents readily offered their perceptions of the mindfulness of their professional or academic workplace. Strong similarities of perceptions of workplace social order were noted throughout the responses. Among professionals, those reporting a perception that their workplace was mindful were in the minority. Overall, the comments from professionals affirm that PR work can be simultaneously autonomous but stressful, and outcomes can be ambiguous, yet deadline-driven. Professionals reported time management flexibility in an environment with long work hours.

Overall, undergraduates offered a stronger perception of a mindful (academic) workplace, with slightly more than half answering in the affirmative. This may be attributable to students' greater freedom generally because students are unlikely to spend an entire day sitting in an office. Still, students had their own set of workplace stressors that included distractions, interpersonal conflict, hurt feelings, and lack of time to do their best quality work. Student comments reflect strikingly similar

perceptions of workplace social order as those suggested by professionals.

No professionals reported mindfulness interventions presented in their workplace, and only one undergraduate reported a presentation of a mindfulness intervention: “Most recently our professor has taken a few moments to help do mindfulness exercises. I’ve really liked it because it has slowed down my morning and helped me focus on what my tasks are ahead.”

The fact that PR professionals and students responded so similarly to the items on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale suggests that, when put in stressful situations, PR professionals and students perceive their environment and responses in much the same way. There is, in this context, a shared social order.

The strong similarities between reported perceptions of mindfulness by students and professionals suggest undergraduates could emotionally relate to concerns of the profession before they enter it. On the other hand, the lack of widespread perception among students that mindfulness is relevant in PR may suggest a lack of understanding of how mindfulness intervention can be a valuable coping strategy in a stressful occupation.

If undergraduates were made aware that some of their perceptions of specific mindfulness strengths and weaknesses align with those of working PR professionals, students might have a greater appreciation of what it is like to be a professional. Likewise, if undergraduates were educated to the benefits of mindfulness intervention as a coping strategy in PR, they might be more likely to see mindfulness as an essential skill to master before entering the workplace.

Educators are well aware that the public relations field is undergoing extensive transformational change, which can result in feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and helplessness (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018; USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations,

2019). Helping public relations undergraduates through a systematic mindfulness intervention could help students cope with the immediate stresses of change within the academic world and, over the long term, prepare for stresses they will face in a rapidly changing field.

A systematic mindfulness intervention has the potential to do more than just help students navigate their way through problems. It can reinforce appropriate social order through demonstrating the importance of facing every professional encounter with poise, grace, and a strong sense of professional ethics. Even if ours was a perfect world free of all professional conflict, mindfulness would still be valuable to help people understand themselves and the others with whom they interact.

Limitations of the Study and Future Directions for Research

In the context of identifying survey populations, this exploratory study required some accommodations. In order to easily identify a population of PR professionals for the survey, the study targeted PRSA members. There was no way to efficiently identify and survey public relations professionals who were not among the association's membership.

There was no way to randomly survey undergraduates studying public relations and planning to enter the PR career field. Therefore, in order to identify a population of undergraduates for survey, the study targeted university student-run PR agencies. Agency advisers were solicited to distribute the undergraduate survey link to their students. Although advisers were willing to do this, the number of students that received the link is unknown because not all advisers complied with a request for their agency enrollment. The different methods of reaching PR professionals and students prevent any statistical comparison of results.

These structural limitations illustrate some of the opportunities that exist for future research to build upon the findings presented here. Future research could include use of the MAAS for a larger, random survey of professionals and students. This would allow quantitative comparison of

mindful attention awareness scores between two populations. In addition, the MAAS could be used to survey public relations educators to allow understanding of their perceptions of mindful awareness at work.

More descriptive qualitative research methods such as focus groups or in-depth interviews could be conducted to develop a detailed picture of how mindful and mindless actions impact the practice of public relations by professionals, educators, and undergraduates preparing for the workplace. Employers consistently argue that undergraduates enter the workplace lacking basic skills (Gaschen & Swanson, 2014), and a research inquiry could dig deeper into why those skills are perceived to be absent and whether mindlessness in the academic environment plays a role.

Structured mindfulness interventions could be undertaken in the public relations workplace to learn more about the stress professionals face and the coping methods they apply. Likewise, structured interventions could be planned and carried out in higher education programs. The documented results of these efforts could illustrate the efficacy of mindfulness in helping undergraduates cope with stress related to career preparation.

People's level of mindful awareness may vary (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016), making it common for someone to slip from a state of mindful awareness to one of mindless busyness. The body of literature on mindfulness could be advanced by different types of inquiries into how workers can catch themselves when distraction occurs, and what they do to regain a more mindful composure. All of these ideas would offer valuable additional knowledge about public relations practice and undergraduate preparation for PR careers. There would also be new insights into the social order that manifests as people work together to prepare for and then engage in public relations work.

Conclusion

It is important to understand that workplace conflicts may be

symptoms of a bigger problem—an absence of mindfulness in the workplace. This absence of mindfulness is relevant because social order can be manifested in disorder as organizations and the people working within them struggle to be productive and creative. The construct of social order framed this inquiry because in public relations there is a great need for balancing productivity and creativity, especially as the technological demands of public relations work continue to expand. Professionals and educators in many other occupational fields recognize the importance of mindfulness as a contributor to a socially ordered workplace. It is hoped the findings of this exploratory study will prompt consideration and further inquiry in our field.

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Appendix A

PRSA Member Professional Questions From the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale

Undergraduate student questions read, *When I am working in the student agency...*

Here is a collection of statements about experiences that can occur at work in public relations. Using the 1-6 scale as shown, please indicate how frequently or infrequently you perceive having these experiences: [1] Almost Always, [2] Very Frequently, [3] Somewhat Frequently, [4] Somewhat Infrequently, [5] Very Infrequently, [6] Almost Never. Please answer according to how you perceive your work experience, as opposed to what you think your experience ought to be like. Please treat each item separately from the others.

When I am working, I can be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until a later time.

When I am working, I lose, break or spill things because of being careless, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.

When I am working, I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.

When I am working, I tend to move quickly without paying attention to what I experience along the way.

When I am working, I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.

When I am working, I forget a person's name almost as soon as I've been told it for the first time.

When I am working, it seems I am "running on automatic" without much awareness of what I'm doing.

When I am working, I rush through activities without really being attentive to them.

When I am working, I can get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I'm doing right now to get there.

When I am working, I perform jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.

When I am working, I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.

When I am working, I go to places and then wonder why I went there.

When I am working, I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.

When I am working, I find myself doing things without paying attention.

When I am working, I snack without being aware that I'm eating.

Table 1

Mindfulness Defined and Workplace Relevance Explained by PR Professionals and PR Students

What do you think Mindfulness is all about?	Professionals	Students
It's about being aware or present in the moment.	38%	17%
It's about increasing productivity.	14%	19%
It's the same as meditation.	12%	11%
It's about slowing down productivity.	3%	0
It's about making you smarter.	3%	7%
It's about fixing something wrong with you.	3%	3%
It's the newest trendy thing.	3%	3%
It's about suppressing bad feelings.	1%	2%
It's Buddhism in disguise.	1%	2%
It accompanies yoga.	1%	6%
It's about escaping reality.	0	2%
It's relevant to public relations work.	50%	24%
It's very irrelevant to public relations work.	0	0

Note. Multiple responses allowed. Fifty-five professionals responded with a total of 88 responses. Sixty-seven students responded with a total of 141 responses.

Figure 2

Mindful Workplace? – Comments by Professionals and Undergraduates Completing the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)

Professionals	Students
Total number of comments = 42	Total number of comments = 39
<p>Is your workplace a mindful place? Yes – 36% No – 38% Not sure – 25%</p>	<p>Is your student agency a mindful place? Yes – 53% No – 21% Not sure – 25%</p>
Selected comments:	Selected comments:
<p>We are dealing with communicating facts and details to larger audiences so it is important to be mindful of accuracy, tone and potential impact. The problem is some routine, repeated prep work can feel mindless.</p>	<p>At our student-run agency, students show mindfulness to their co-workers, customers, and advisors. It is about being aware of everyone’s thoughts and feelings and using that awareness to make the right decisions.</p>
<p>Everybody is running around trying to put out today’s fires. There isn’t a lot of time for mindfulness or planning or even focusing on a project.</p>	<p>We’re taught to be mindful of how our work impacts our clients, and we have to think about our audience’s POV before we do anything.</p>
<p>If you feel bad you bury it to be a good employee.</p>	<p>Recently, people are preoccupied with other school work/priorities that it feels like often times no ones really all “there” or exhibiting their best thinking/work.</p>
<p>It takes conscious effort, but when the days are long and it’s dark when you arrive and when you leave, it’s really important to remember WHY we show up every day.</p>	<p>Sometimes the workload is so intense I have to go on autopilot grind mode and get things done as fast as I can. I feel like I don’t get the time to make the best work possible.</p>

Professionals	Students
Total number of comments = 42	Total number of comments = 39
<p>Each person has their own way to release stress. Some go for a way, some leave early to take an exercise class, some come in a bit later to exercise in the morning. Our agency understands the need to balance hard work and those of the individual. We also believe in having fun at work and implement different ways to do that as well.</p>	<p>The agency does encourage you to think critically and reflect, but it's not mindfulness because there isn't enough time and energy to devote to think about your thinking.</p>
<p>I have a lot of autonomy at work and I consider myself mindful. Whether the workplace is 'mindful,' I am unsure.</p>	

Note. Selected comments are presented here as they were written.

Table 2

Perceptions of Mindful Attention Awareness by PR Professionals and PR Undergraduates Completing the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)

Workplace Action or Response	Professionals (n = 57)		Students (n = 81)		Workplace Action or Response
	Frequently or Always Mindful	Infrequently or Almost Never Mindful	Frequently or Always Mindful	Infrequently or Almost Never Mindful	
Physical movement	96%	3%	93%	6%	Attentiveness to belongings
Attentiveness to belongings	94%	5%	90%	9%	Physical movement
Pace of activity	90%	9%	85%	14%	Multitasking
Multitasking	83%	16%	84%	15%	Pace of activity
“In the now”	81%	18%	83%	16%	Eating
Task awareness	81%	18%	81%	18%	Focus
“Running on automatic”	81%	18%	78%	21%	“In the now”
Eating	80%	20%	78%	21%	Task awareness
Mental preoccupation	77%	22%	78%	21%	Physical tension or discomfort
Focus	74%	25%	75%	24%	The personal experience
The personal experience	67%	32%	75%	24%	“Running on automatic”
Emotional response	61%	38%	74%	25%	Emotional response
Physical tension or discomfort	61%	38%	69%	30%	Short-term memory recall
Inattentive listening	47%	52%	55%	44%	Mental preoccupation
Short-term memory recall	43%	56%	45%	54%	Inattentive listening