Research Analysis on Personality and Mediation Success

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Introduction

As the eastern practice of meditation has gained popularity in the west, increasing quantities of anecdotal evidence and empirical research alike have touted the positive effects of the practice. The effects of mindfulness are being researched extensively with 20,000 papers having been published on the topic as of 2021 (Osin & Turilina, 2021). Numbers of meditators in western societies across the globe continue to rise, and yet, for being such an impactful, accessible, and affordable practice, it's a wonder that even more people aren't participating. What barriers stand in the way of people taking part in meditation practices? Do personality factors play a role in the adherence to and effectiveness of meditative practices? Research by Osin & Turilina published in 2021 suggests that the answer is yes: in their research, "intraclass correlation coefficients for the DVs ranged from .38 to .55, indicating that a substantial proportion of variance could be attributed to individual differences" (p. 1).

Exploring the answers to these questions delves into a relative gap in the current research on meditation, which focuses more on the effects of meditation. But many of the positive effects of meditation can only be realized through consistent practice. Discovering personality factors that are predictive of success or struggles in meditation can help predict engagement in meditation programs and provide insight on how best to mitigate the barriers that prevent some from reaping the benefits of this practice. This literature review will first cover the traits that predict meditation adherence and success, and then discuss factors that pose as barriers to the same.

Body

When it comes to the current research on the relationship between personality traits and meditation, the Big Five personality inventory is the most widely researched model. In a study by Bailey, et al. (2019), in which medical students were guided to take up a daily mindfulness meditation practice, higher scores on the Big Five trait of agreeableness were found to have a medium positive correlation with higher amounts of mindfulness meditation, at an r rate of 0.33 and a p value of 0.02. Bailey, et al. notes that previous studies have found correlations between agreeableness and trait mindfulness, another predictor of meditation success that will be discussed later. In 2017, Kambolis conducted a literature review that supported the finding of agreeableness as a predictor of meditative success, and further found that the traits of agreeableness, openness, and extraversion have been correlated with increased likelihood of taking up meditation.

It makes sense that agreeableness is conducive to both taking up meditation in the first place as well as meditating for more time. Higher scores on the agreeableness scale relate to higher levels of trust which would contribute to someone believing that meditation is worth a try and initiating the practice. Agreeableness also includes the trait of cooperation, which could incline people to adhere to an assigned meditation regimen.

Continuing to analyze Big Five traits, Matko, et al., (2022), found that those with higher levels of anxiety and neuroticism experienced higher than average increases in emotional regulation skills after an eight-week mindfulness meditation intervention. Findings from Iceland via Orlygsdottir, et al. (2015) found an additional relationship between meditation and anxiety when a general survey revealed a correlation between higher levels of anxiety and higher likelihood of practicing meditation. Results in the US further supported this finding, with research from Morone et al. (2017) showing that meditators were more likely to report feeling nervous, sad or stressed at least a little bit of the time more so than non-meditators.

These results indicate that the traits of neuroticism, anxiety, sadness, and stress increase the likelihood of a person practicing meditation. This is likely because they are motivated to experiment with meditation in an attempt to alter their mental state. And the people experiencing these mental states also benefit more from meditation, which can contribute to a feeling of satisfaction and belief in the efficacy of the practice, instilling motivation to continue the practice.

There are other ways that attitudes, especially motivation, can impact meditation. Osin & Turilina (2021) found that meditators who feel autonomously motivated to meditate - that is, they are meditating for their own personal reasons rather than external influences - more easily adhere to meditation regimens and gain more benefits from the practice. Another attitude that impacts meditation as found by Kambolis (2017) was that people who started out believing that meditation is effective were more likely to stick to their meditation routine. Finally, Orlygsdottir et al. (2021) found that having a negative attitude toward traditional medicine and psychiatric services correlated with higher rates of yoga and meditation use. So, their attitudes toward modern medicine create an internal motivation to seek alternative health management practices. As noted above, personality traits such as neuroticism and anxiety impact attitudes, which in turn impact a person's level of motivation.

Another personality factor to take into account is a person's base level of attention and mindfulness. Trait mindfulness is a person's general level of mindfulness in everyday situations, as compared to state mindfulness which is a temporary state often achieved through meditation. Greif & Kaufman (2019) found that individuals with lower trait mindfulness scores showed the highest increases in state mindfulness after meditation.

Higher trait mindfulness, however, is associated with a higher amount of time spent meditating, according to Bailey, et al., (2019). Grief & Kaufman also found that those with high levels of attention performance showed higher increases in state mindfulness after meditation, indicating that it was easier for them to enter into a mindful state. So, although those with lower trait mindfulness stand to gain the most state mindfulness through meditation, people with higher trait mindfulness and higher attention performance are more likely to meditate more and enjoy meditation more, respectively. This suggests that those with lower state mindfulness may benefit from more guidance and support in order to help them continue a meditation practice and reap the benefits.

Some results for the positive predictors discussed above were contradictory between studies. This was less true for negative predictors, which were more consistent across studies. The Big Five personality trait that was the most widely supported as a barrier to consistent and effective meditation practice was neuroticism. Higher scores on the neuroticism scale were found to be related to lower involvement in online meditation interventions (Kambolis, 2017) and to a higher perception of barriers to meditation (Whitford & Warren, 2019). The results mentioned above indicate that people exhibiting higher levels of neuroticism, anxiety, and stress are more likely to have tried meditation and to benefit more from meditation. However, these same traits are predictors of attrition from meditation practice, especially online or self-guided practices (Kambolis, 2017).

Three additional studies further discuss individual qualities that are loosely related to neuroticism and further support the findings mentioned above. Osin & Turilina (2021) found that individuals who scored lower on self-regulation scales and who were more prone to experiencing rumination were more likely to perceive meditation as difficult and boring and to eventually give up the practice. Moreover, Kambolis' 2017 results indicate that "higher depressive rumination, cognitive reactivity and brooding" predicted higher difficulty in engaging in the meditation intervention. And according to Schlosser, et al., (2019) individuals with higher rates of negative thinking were more likely to report particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences.

Greif & Kaufman's 2019 findings indicate that people with lower levels of attention performance may find it more difficult to enter into a mindful state during meditation, which may lead to frustration and raise the likelihood of discontinuing the practice. These findings indicate that the experience of the meditator plays a significant role in continuance of the practice. When pairing these findings with the finding of Matko, et al., (2022), evidence shows that participants with higher levels of neuroticism benefited most from meditation. This makes the tragic point that those who

might benefit most from meditation may struggle the most to adhere to the practice long enough to reap the benefits.

Gender is also a significant factor in this sphere of research. In a cross-sectional study by Schlosser, et al. (2019), data showed that across studied predictors of having negative experiences with meditation, men were more likely to report "particularly unpleasant" meditation experiences than women were. Men were less likely to use meditation in conjunction with yoga (Schroter & Cramer, 2021), had lower decentering ability (Matko, et al., 2022), benefited less from meditation (Schlosser, et al., 2019), and simply used meditation less than women did (Orlygsdottir, et al., 2021). Many of the samples in these studies had more female than male participants despite recruiting from the general population; for example, Osin & Turilina's (2021) sample was 79.87% female. Kambolis (2017) and Schlosser et al. (2019) both suggest that social expectations on how men feel and express emotion may play a role here. "Literature suggests that men experience more restrictive emotionality and emotion regulation difficulties," (Schlosser, et al., 2019) which may leave them less equipped than women to objectively observe the emotions that do arise during meditation.

Conclusion

In studying and synthesizing the results of the literature included in this review, it confirms the importance of this research. Kambolis points out that in cross-sectional studies of established meditators, it can be difficult to determine if traits they share are the result of meditation or were present before meditation and contributed to the person becoming a meditator. Putting all these findings together also creates some insight into what kind of personality factors help and hinder a person on the path of meditation. Three main impacts seem to come to the forefront when examining these personality factors and their effects.

One is a person's willingness to try meditation in the first place, which is predictably related to openness and agreeableness. The majority of studies on meditation simply measure the effects of meditation, and this has led to a misconception that meditators are naturally more agreeable, mindful, and satisfied with life than people who don't meditate. This misconception can deter people who feel that they don't fit the stereotype of a meditator. The reality is that some of the very states least associated with meditation - stress, anxiety, and neuroticism - are actually predictors of a person gaining more benefits from a meditation practice. Pairing this with the knowledge gained about agreeableness and motivation offers insight into how to frame meditation so that skeptical people are willing to give it a try.

The second main idea is how personality affects adhere to meditation regimens. Attitudes stand out as having an impact primarily on

adherence to meditation practices. This makes sense, as adhering to a consistent meditation practice over time takes dedication that can be difficult to sustain without motivation. Traits can influence these attitudes, with neuroticism and a tendency for rumination predicting difficulty adhering to practice programs. Knowing what kinds of traits and attitudes cause attrition from meditation programs can equip meditation teachers to address and hopefully adapt these attitudes at the outset of interventions, resulting in better adherence and more beneficial outcomes. This research also highlights the value of reducing the attrition of people with higher levels of neuroticism and rumination, given that these exact traits that make consistent practice difficult are also traits that foretell greater benefits if the person is able to maintain practice. This leads to the third main impact of personality on meditation, which is how different people respond to meditation based on their personality.

In a few different ways, the research indicates that those with certain traits - such as low mindfulness and high anxiety and neuroticism - show the highest improvements after meditation interventions. Throughout the literature, there is a recurring theme that those who could stand to benefit most from meditation may be the most likely to drop out (Whitford & Warren, 2019). It is for this reason that this research is so relevant, as discovering how to overcome the interest and attitude barriers mentioned above would help the people who could benefit the most from meditation successfully take up and continue the practice.

There remains a significant gap in the research of the personality factors that contribute to a successful, long-term meditation practice. These findings indicate a few directions that future studies should focus on. One important direction for research is continuing to replicate these studies with various populations to get more generalizable results, as many of these studies focused on homogeneous groups or small groups. Specifically, an effort to study equal quantities of males and females would help to make results more generalizable, as to date, women make up a slight majority of participants.

Perhaps most important for this research niche is to continue doing studies that take measurements of novice meditators before and after meditation. Cross-sectional studies of established meditators, as mentioned above, have the limitation of being a self-selected group from the outset, rendering those results less applicable in this particular niche. Another direction for future research is starting to study how people with particular sets of traits respond differently to particular types of meditation. For instance, Schlosser, et al., (2019) found that "odds of particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences were 65% higher in meditators who only engaged in deconstructive practices compared to meditators who only engaged in non deconstructive practices" (p. 6). So, future research that cross references personality traits with types of meditation could offer

insight into what styles of practice are the best suited for people of particular temperaments.

This aspect of mindfulness research is as yet a nascent niche but is bound to continue growing as the utility of applying knowledge of the interaction between personality and meditation becomes more obvious. Applying the science of psychology to the art of meditation can offer insight into how to apply this ancient practice to the people of the modern world.

Sources

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