

Do Mindfulness and Psychological well-being improve in old age? Exploring Gender Differences

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The current paper delves into gender differences in the elderly regarding mindfulness and well-being, which have been highly inconsistent in the literature. Therefore, to gain better insight, this study was performed. The findings revealed that elderly females were found to be more mindful and have better psychological well-being than their counterparts. The findings have been discussed in light of social-emotional and self-determination theories.

Key words: Gender, Mindfulness, Psychological wellbeing, social emotional theory, self-determination theory

Introduction

Mindfulness is understood as a “method of regulating attention to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to existing experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of inquisitiveness, experiential openness, and acceptance” (Bishop, 2004, p. 234). It is more pre-conceptual awareness, deliberate attention management, nonjudgmental acceptance of reality, and a present-focused orientation (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Self-regulation and attention to the present are obligatory for mindfulness (Bishop, 2004). Research on mindfulness suggests that these practices are used to treat a variety of human sufferings and illnesses. For instance, research has mentioned that it may directly reduce sadness, stress, and hostility as well as promote psychological well-being through the mediational process of other factors (Marlatt, 2002). Additionally, research on non-clinical populations demonstrates that mindfulness decreases negative emotions, rumination, stress experience, anxiety, somatization, aggression, and avoidance behavior while increasing self-compassion, positive affection, well-being, and quality of life (Shapiro et al., 2008). Furthermore, mindfulness may improve health and make one emotionally resilient in negative and adverse

situations (Breslin, Zack, & McMMain, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Psychological well-being (PWB) is understood as “interaction with existential difficulties of life” (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). It is reflected in the evaluation of people’s lives; such evaluation covers a wide range of constructs like purpose in life, life satisfaction, emotion regulation, self-acceptance, etc. Generally, it is one kind of well-being. Still, it is believed to be an essential part of an individual’s life because it is usually concerned with the mental or psychological health of an individual. Psychological well-being refers to the subjective feelings of contentment and happiness, satisfaction with life, personal growth, control over one’s environment, feelings of self-dependence and acceptance, a sense of accomplishment, etc. (Verma & Verma, 1989). In the same way, Bhogle and Prakash (1995) have suggested that PWB includes various things like meaning in life, absence of somatic symptoms, self-esteem, positive affect, daily activities, satisfaction, lack of suicidal ideas, personal control, social support, absence of tension, and general efficiency. Burris, Brechting, Salsman, and Carlson (2009) gave an operational definition of psychological well-being, which includes the notion of a person’s welfare, happiness, advantages, interests, utility, and quality of life. It can be achieved through sensory stimulation, adopting a healthy lifestyle, social interaction, establishing positive relationships with others, supporting family members, engaging in

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enjoyable activities such as aerobics, yoga, exercise, etc., and mindfulness exercises. Several studies indicate that people with higher psychological well-being led to healthier and longer lives and were less affected by worse conditions (Kubzansky et al., 2018).

Studies exploring the relationship between mindfulness and PWB have indicated that increased mindfulness is linked with reduced stress and depression in one community sample and one with cancer patients using Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Carlson et al., 2003; Bränström et al., 2010). Similar results were reported in research on 206 University of Massachusetts Medical School students, who discovered that practicing mindfulness meditation was a strong predictor of reduced stress and higher well-being. Numerous other studies on mindfulness and well-being have shown that mindfulness meditation can increase well-being by exerting a positive influence on mood (Davidson et al., 2003; Erisman & Roemer, 2010; Goldin & Gross, 2010; Johnson, Gur, David, & Currier, 2015) and anxiety (Farb et al., 2010; McKim, 2008; Rosenzweig, Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Hojat, 2003; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Further research conducted by Baer et al. (2008) and Josefsson, Larsman, Broberg, and Lundh (2011) on a sample of meditators and non-meditators has revealed that facets of trait mindfulness mediate the connection between the experience of meditation and psychological well-being.

Other types of research have been designed experimentally by Ortner, Kilner, and Zelazo (2007), who have attempted to observe behavioural and neurobiological correlates of mindfulness meditation and developed an emotional interference task in which participants categorized tones presented for 1 or 4 seconds following the onset of affective/neutral pictures. The findings revealed that participant's mindfulness meditation experience was found to be significantly related to decreased interference both from unpleasant pictures (for 1 and 4 sec delays) and pleasant pictures (for 4 sec. delays only); along with this, they have also self-reported increased levels of mindfulness and PWB, implying mindfulness meditation practice may enhance psychological well-being.

From the above discussion, it is clear that mindfulness increases one's well-being; however, in many studies conducted on patient groups, adolescents used

mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques. Few attempts have been made on the elderly, taking these two variables together. Selecting this study sample seems crucial as physical and mental capacity declines during this period, and attitudes towards life satisfaction and psychological well-being also get affected. Studies show that older beings are more susceptible to certain losses as they lose their life partners, family members, friends, and neighbours due to illness, divorce, death, relocation owing to job changes, retirement, etc. It is that moment in life when people experience a variety of common issues, such as physical helplessness, financial uncertainty, loneliness, increasing free time, a lack of social support, and health complaints, among others, that directly impact their mental and psychological well-being.

Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting oneself unstuck and taking charge of oneself, which leads to a sense of subjective well-being. Given this, the current study aimed to compare mindfulness and psychological well-being among elderly males and females. In old age, where the elderly face various problems, a lack of acceptance of the challenges and difficulties associated with old age becomes more prominent. In this context, research evidence shows the importance of mindfulness in ageing. At this phase of life, mindfulness brings acceptance within the elderly towards difficult situations of life, with the thought that all these problems are part of life that cannot be changed, but by adjusting themselves to them, a satisfied life can be made. Therefore, mindfulness helps individuals develop an understanding or insight into their strengths and abilities to lead a meaningful and purposeful life, enhancing psychological well-being. Further, a vast body of research suggests that as one grows and sees the future as limited, one starts to emphasize emotion-related goals, such as experiencing happiness in the moment and finding emotional meaning in life because these goals can be accomplished in the present moment. The foremost priority of emotional goals set by these elders explains why older individuals report and experience better emotional well-being and emotion regulation.

In context of aging, literature reviews related to the present study has identified an important promoting variable i.e., mindfulness which seems pertinent to

explore in old age. Further, elderly people face various physical and psychological challenges (various kinds of disease like blood pressure, diabetes, lack of adjustment, death of spouse, loneliness, financial issues etc.) and they get distracted internally from all these problems and forget their real goal of life (to transfer their norms and values to the next generation for directing their life positively) which adversely affects their psychological well-being. Mindfulness has positive impact on well-being of an elderly people precisely, the psychological well-being. Mindfulness not only provides elderly a hope to live life but also contribute to living a longer life. Despite being a significant predictor of well-being, little research has been conducted on mindfulness in older people.

Likewise, lesser effort has also been expended to explore whether males and females report similar or different levels of mindfulness, as in many of the studies, gender differences in mindfulness are not found (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Catak, 2012; De Petrillo, Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009; Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007; MacKillop & Anderson, 2007; Malcolm, 2008). Since, Akhtar (2015) has stated that gender differences exist both at biological and psychological level and individuals may differ in terms of life satisfaction because people's surrounding (such as comfortable family life, good interpersonal relations, efficient skills etc.) plays pivotal role which may lead to different outcomes and moreover, researches about the differences between women and men on wellbeing have also not yielded steady findings (Ferguson & Gunnell, 2016). As mentioned by Diener and Ryan (2014) fewer gender differences in psychological well-being have been found where women experienced more positive and negative emotions with greater frequency and intensity than men. Thus, taken all previous speculations together, the current study attempts to examine the relevance of gender difference in elderly females and males on mindfulness and psychological well-being measures.

Method

Sample

The sample consists of one hundred elderly people (fifty elderly males and fifty females) with ages ranging from 60 to 75 years, with a mean age of male ($M=69.00$; $SD=3.73$) and female ($M=68.14$; $SD=3.36$).

The majority of the samples were collected from various places in the Varanasi and Chandauli districts of Uttar Pradesh. The sampled participants were selected based on convenience sampling. None of the participants reported having a terminal disease; however, a few reported having lifestyle health issues.

Tools:

1. Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire-H (FFMQ-H) The twenty-eight items Hindi version of Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire developed by Mandal, Arya, and Pandey (2016) was utilised. This scale was used to measure the general tendency of the individuals to be mindful in their daily life on 5-point Likert scale ranging from "rarely true to always true". The scale covers four dimensions of mindfulness labelled as describing, acting with awareness, non-judgement of inner experience and non-reactivity to inner experiences.

2. Psychological Well Being Scale (PWBS) developed by Sisodia and Chaudhary (2005) for measuring psychological well-being was used. This tool consists of 50 items that were based on the five aspects or areas of well-being such as Life satisfaction, Efficiency, Sociability, Mental health, and Interpersonal relations. PWBS is easy and quick measures rated on a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Procedure

Participants who served the purpose of this study were contacted from the cities above. Initially, the researcher obtained the informed consent for participation in the study. To ensure an honest, correct, and sincere response, the necessary instructions and a brief description of the scales, along with the objectives and importance of the study, were briefed to them. The demographic information was collected, and the related questionnaire was administered to them. After completing each questionnaire, the researcher expressed gratitude to each participant for participating in the study.

Results

Since, the study aimed at examining the gender difference between female and male elderly on mindfulness and psychological wellbeing, therefore, after getting responses from the participants, data were entered and analysed using SPSS and results are presented below.

Table 1
Summary of One-way ANOVA mindfulness and psychological wellbeing in females and males

		Mean Square	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Mindfulness	Between Groups	1296.000	1296.000	1	33.485	.000
	Within Groups	38.704	3793.000	98		
	Total		5089.000	99		
Psychological Wellbeing	Between Groups	9781.210	9781.210	1	33.269	.000
	Within Groups	294.002	28812.180	98		
	Total		38593.390	99		

Perusal of table 1 revealed that one-way ANOVA have yielded significant difference on mindfulness ($F(1, 99) = [33.485], p = 0.000$), and Psychological Wellbeing ($F(1, 99) = [33.269], p = 0.000$) in females and males. Further, mean scores revealed (see table 2) that females have more mindfulness and psychological well-being than male counterpart.

Table 2
Mean difference in Mindfulness and Psychological wellbeing in females and males

		Mean	Std. Deviation
Mindfulness	Female	75.70	6.035
	Male	68.50	6.402
Psychological Wellbeing	Female	221.20	7.379
	Male	201.42	23.099

Discussion

The present study aimed to find out the differences in mindfulness and psychological well-being in elderly females and males, and the observations revealed that elderly females have exhibited more mindfulness and psychological well-being. The current observation is supported by Rojiani et al. (2017). This study was conducted at Brown University, and it was found that after a twelve-week mindfulness program, women's negative mood decreased a lot, and the jolted or boosted mood was directly related to improved five facets of mindfulness skills and self-compassion. One of the interpretations of the current observations can be explained in this way, as mentioned by Friedman (2017)

that mindfulness helps women avoid overreacting to negative feelings, and then they can be less critical and become more compassionate towards themselves, which prevents the negative emotions or feelings from being blown out of proportion. Further, this decreased negative mood and improved positive mood can be explained on the basis of socio-emotional theory, where older adults are motivated to engage in emotional experiences in the present moment, which in turn may make them more involved in mindfulness (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005), because acknowledging positive events and letting go of adverse events may promote psychological well-being in the elderly (de Frias & Whyne, 2015; Ficco & Mallya, 2015).

Additionally, Chambers et al. (2008) have reported that the practice of mindfulness may help individuals lessen their emotional reactivity and people use their body as a support and warning measure to recognise and refine emotional and cognitive reactions. Executive cognitions, mainly attention control and mindfulness, may improve psychological well-being. Thus, findings can be understood this way that when an individual increases paying attention to moment-to-moment situations, mindfulness is found to increase people's happiness (Zandi et al., 2021) and improve PWB by fostering one's awareness and acceptance of inner feelings without judgement, which is an imperative source of self-regulation, as self-regulation helps to improve PWB (Huang et al., 2021; Shankland et al., 2020).

The current observation that females are more mindful and have greater PWB can be explained on the basis of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2014). It says that mindfulness is imperative in

disengaging individuals from automatic thoughts, habits, and maladaptive behavioural styles, which helps to deal with and accept vulnerabilities (associated with old age) as well as challenging situations better in life that plays a significant role in fostering self-regulation, which in turn facilitates psychological wellbeing. Further, Brown and Ryan (2003) and Feldman et al. (2007) reported that greater mindfulness was related to better emotion regulation. A large body of research establishes the

positive effect of mindfulness-based practices on emotion regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011).

This study has tried to explain the gender differences in mindfulness and psychological well-being by supporting numerous theories. Thus, the result of this research is pertinent for healthcare providers and policymakers promoting successful ageing and increasing the well-being of older people. However, the data was restricted to a small sample; therefore, the findings can be enlightened cautiously.

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