

# **Experiential Self-Referential and Selfless Processing in Mindfulness and Mental Health: Conceptual Model and Implicit Measurement**

## **Methodology**

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**Background and objectives:** We propose that Experiential Self-Referential Processing (ESRP) – the cognitive association of present moment subjective experience with the self – is an important meta-cognitive process underlying various forms of maladaptation. We theorize that mindfulness contributes to mental health by engendering Experiential Selfless Processing (ESLP) – processing present moment subjective experience without self-referentiality. To help advance understanding of these processes we aimed to develop an implicit, behavioral measure of ESRP and ESLP of fear, to experimentally validate this measure, and to test the relations between ESRP and ESLP of fear, mindfulness, and key psychobehavioral processes underlying (mal)adaptation.

**Methods:** 138 adults were randomized to 1 of 3 conditions: control, meta-awareness with identification, or meta-awareness with disidentification. We then measured ESRP and ESLP of fear by experimentally eliciting a subjective experience of fear, while concurrently measuring participants' cognitive association between her/himself and fear by means of the Single Experience & Self Implicit Association Test (SES-IAT).

**Results:** As predicted, we found preliminary experimental and correlational evidence suggesting the SES-IAT measures ESLP of fear and two forms of ESRP – identification with fear and negative self-referential evaluation of fear. Furthermore, we found evidence that ESRP and ESLP are associated with meta-awareness (a core process of mindfulness), as well as key psychobehavioral processes underlying maladaptation (intolerance of distress and fear, reactivity to thought content, anxiety symptoms).

**Discussion and conclusion:** These findings indicate that the cognitive association of self with experience (i.e., ESRP) may be an important substrate of the sense of self, and an important determinant of mental health.