

Mindlessness–Mindfulness in Perspective: A Reply to Valerie Folkes

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Folkes (1985) questions Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz's (1978) analysis of the mindlessness of subjects' actions in complying with confederates requests. She asserts that the differential rates of compliance that we obtained can be traced to the perceived controllability of the reasons provided. She uses the data that she obtained to claim that our subjects were cognitively active and that the concept of mindlessness is not useful. We see nothing in her results that would lead us to change our position: People are sometimes mindful and sometimes not.

At a time when most people in the field of cognitive social psychology were focusing on the ways individuals were actively processing information, Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) conducted three studies that showed that people may be processing less information than was typically assumed. We drew the distinction between *mindful* and *mindless* cognitive activity. When *mindful*, the individual was presumed to be actively drawing distinctions, making meaning, or creating categories. When *mindless*, the individual was said to rely on distinctions already drawn. Mindless behavior is rigidly (i.e., single-mindedly) dictated by the past. Therefore, much of the on-going present situation is hypothesized to go unexamined.

In one of those studies, subjects were approached at a copying machine and asked if the confederate could use it instead. The request was varied, and subjects were given either a request with no reason, a "real" reason, or a request with "placebic" information—information that was redundant with the request. Similarity in compliance between the placebic and real information, in view of a difference between these two and the instance where the request was made without a reason, suggested that at least for

some favors, subjects did not actively think about what they heard.

In that work, we state that compliance to placebic information is not irrational or stupid because many tasks may be performed successfully without expending the extra effort it would take to do so mindfully. It is "mindless in the sense that attention is not paid precisely to those substantive elements that are relevant for the successful resolution of the situation" (p. 636). We went on to say, "instead of viewing people as either rational or irrational, it would seem wise to at least consider the possibility that their behavior may be arational and yet in some way systematic" (p. 641). The clear presupposition of that statement is that it does not necessarily follow that if persons are not acting rationally, then they are acting irrationally. For this to follow, one would have to presume that persons inescapably must constantly employ their rationality and that the only choice they have is whether to employ it rightly or wrongly.

Further, mindless activity does not imply the absence of all cognitive processing—just the absence of flexible cognitive processing. Under such circumstances, individuals are neither reasoning well nor reasoning badly about the significance of the environment. They are not reasoning at all. They are engaged in cognitive activity, but it is of a reduced sort (if such a distinction must be put in quantitative terms)—where they are taking the environment at its past word rather

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than seeking to understand what its current word means. Without some cognitive monitoring, the person clearly would not be able to detect the presence of cues that would signal either mindfulness or mindlessness. Thus, when mindlessly taking in information, the person, for example, hears what is being said but does not "work on" the information.

In this copying study, the size of the favor was varied to further show that sometimes mindfulness would result (in the case of the larger favor) and sometimes mindlessness would result. The point was simply to caution researchers from presuming that mindfulness was always the case. Subsequent studies concerned with performance debilitations (e.g., Chanowitz & Langer, 1981; Langer & Imber, 1979; Langer & Newman, 1979; Langer & Piper, 1984; Langer & Weinman, 1981), deviance (e.g., Langer, Bashner, & Chanowitz, in press; Langer & Imber, 1980), and aging (e.g., Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies, 1984; Langer, 1982; Langer, Beck, Janoff-Bulman, & Timko, 1984; Langer, Perlmutter, Chanowitz, & Rubin, 1984; Langer, Perlmutter, & Schulman, 1984; and Perlmutter & Langer, 1982) made clear in our own work that the distinction between mindfulness and mindlessness, as first drawn in the copying machine study, could be important.

Folkes (1985) has conducted research using the copying machine and has found what she takes to be conflicting results. We do not, however, feel that the Folke's findings threaten our original position. It was never our belief that *anything* could be used as a reason for *any* request to obtain mindless compliance. Indeed, one could probably set up the experiment using a belligerent reason that could also result in mindless noncompliance. Our point, again, was simply to make researchers aware of these two qualitatively different modes of processing the environment. People may be mindful when you give them reasons to be and mindless when you do not.

As an aside, we do not understand why Folkes finds no difference between the real-reason and no-reason conditions. One would think that any person reasoning about a request would be more likely to comply, if a good reason accompanied that request, than if there were no reason. Although she notes the problem of a ceiling effect in her data,

she goes on to discuss the results ignoring her own important observation. Even if one were to grant that subjects in this study were actively processing information, the demonstration of mindfulness under some conditions, of course, does not rule out mindlessness under others.

The far more important point is that in numerous studies that go beyond the one under discussion, the mindlessness-mindfulness concept has proven useful. This and more recent research suggest to us that mindlessness may be pervasive. Nevertheless, we do not feel that this is the issue on which research should most meaningfully focus. The larger concern is to understand how mindlessness works, determine its consequences, and specify better the conditions under which it is and is not likely to occur (see Langer, 1978).

Valerie Folkes has done a service and that is to make apparent the need for a clearer articulation of this concept. The many studies conducted since the original copying machine study have enabled our own understanding of the phenomenon and its boundaries to broaden. That understanding has guided the design of many intervention strategies. Because the results of these new investigations have been dramatic, it is important that we share our deeper understanding with our colleagues. We intend to do this in subsequent articles.

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