

Reconsidering the Exclusion of Langerian Mindfulness:

A Commentary on Chems-Maarif et al. (2025)

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Both authors have collaborated with Ellen J. Langer, whose construct is the subject of this commentary. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

Abstract

Objectives. Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) propose a refined definition of mindfulness for psychological science and exclude Langer’s socio-cognitive construct on the grounds that it is empirically differentiated from Buddhist-inspired conceptualizations. This commentary offers a perspective on that exclusion.

Methods. We examine two questions. First, what does the factor-analytic separation between the Langer Mindfulness Scale and Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire-family measures establish about conceptual independence? Second, how stable is the Buddhist-inspired category from which the refined definition is synthesized? We use Jon Kabat-Zinn’s evolving definitions, the current MBSR curriculum, and MBSR’s founding pedagogy as an illustrative case.

Results. Scale-level separation is weak evidence of conceptual independence: the FFMQ’s own Observe facet fails to cohere with the other facets in non-meditating samples, self-report measures of mindfulness are widely acknowledged to be limited, and the psychometric structure of the LMS is itself contested. Separately, the Buddhist-inspired category is less internally stable than presented: Kabat-Zinn and the current MBSR curriculum now foreground innateness, ordinary-life awareness, and fresh perception, elements that closely parallel Langer’s account, and MBSR’s introductory exercises have operationally instantiated Langerian noticing since the program’s inception.

Conclusions. The constructs may be conceptually related yet usefully kept operationally distinct. Our claim is simple: the Langerian construct belongs in the field’s definitional conversation, and the question of how the two traditions relate should be settled by comparative empirical work rather than by exclusion.

Keywords: mindfulness; Langerian mindfulness; Kabat-Zinn; MBSR; measurement; definitional refinement

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The narrative review by Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) makes a careful contribution to the long-standing problem of definitional heterogeneity in mindfulness research. Synthesizing Buddhist and psychological-science conceptualizations, the authors arrive at a refined definition for psychological science: “present-centered awareness of and bare attention to body sensations, affective valence, cognitive and emotional phenomena, and the external environment with an allowing and equanimous attitude” (p. 15). In delimiting their scope, however, they make a specific exclusion. They write that “conceptualizations that are fully divorced from Buddhist inspiration are not considered in this paper as such separate frameworks are grounded in distinct theoretical foundations that appear to be empirically differentiated” (p. 3), citing Karl and Fischer (2020). The construct singled out is Langer’s mindfulness, set down in 1978 (Langer, 1978; Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978) and consolidated in *Mindfulness* (Langer, 1989).

This commentary is offered as a perspective, not a review. Its claim is deliberately narrow: the Langerian construct belongs in the field’s conversation about what mindfulness is, and its exclusion from a refined definition rests on evidence that is weaker than it appears. We do not argue that the Langerian and Buddhist-inspired traditions are interchangeable, nor that the refined definition should be abandoned, nor do we attempt to survey the many contemplative and psychological sources that inform contemporary mindfulness research. Our aim is to reopen a door that Chems-Maarif et al. closed and to suggest what kind of work would settle the question.

We develop two lines of argument that are logically independent and should be kept apart. The first concerns the empirical-differentiation claim itself: factor-analytic separation

between two scales is weak evidence that the constructs those scales sample are conceptually independent. This argument does not depend on anything Kabat-Zinn has said. The second concerns the internal stability of the “Buddhist-inspired” category from which the refined definition is synthesized: one of that category’s founding figures, and the current curriculum of its most widely disseminated program, now foreground elements that sit outside the refined definition and closely parallel Langer’s. Here we use Kabat-Zinn and MBSR as an illustrative case, not as a proxy for the field. We take up these arguments in turn, then consider the middle position that the constructs are conceptually related but usefully kept operationally distinct, and close with a constructive suggestion.

The Exclusion of Langer in Chems-Maarif et al. (2025)

Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) explicitly restrict their review to conceptualizations that retain Buddhist inspiration. Their stated reason is empirical: in Karl and Fischer (2020), Langer Mindfulness Scale (LMS) items loaded on a separate factor from items drawn from Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ)-family measures. Karl and Fischer describe the LMS as a “conceptually unrelated measure” included in their design and conclude that its items appear to measure a different construct. This is a defensible scope decision for a review aimed at refining the dominant psychological-science definition, and we do not question the authors’ right to make it. We question only whether the empirical basis offered for it can bear the weight placed on it.

The question of how the two traditions relate is not new. Siegel (2007), writing for a mixed audience of clinicians, scholars, and general readers, offered an early synthesis in which the Langerian and Kabat-Zinn formulations are treated as two sides of a single coin. We cite this as one thoughtful opinion rather than as evidence of any settled position in the field; the point is

simply that the exclusion in Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) represents a more conservative stance than some earlier commentators had entertained.

What the Factor-Analytic Evidence Does and Does Not Show

Factor analysis characterizes the covariance structure of responses to a particular set of items in a particular sample. When items from two instruments load on separate factors, the finding tells us that those items, as written, do not covary strongly in that sample. It does not by itself tell us whether the constructs the two instruments were designed to sample are conceptually related, because two instruments can target overlapping constructs through non-overlapping item content, and because sample characteristics can reshape factor structure. Three bodies of evidence bear on how much weight the Karl and Fischer (2020) result can carry.

The FFMQ's Own Facets Do Not Reliably Cohere

The FFMQ-family measures against which the LMS was compared do not themselves form a stable, unified construct across samples. In the original development study (Baer et al., 2006), conducted in undergraduates, hierarchical confirmatory factor analysis rejected a model in which all five facets loaded on a single overarching mindfulness factor; a four-facet model that omitted Observe fit the data, and the full five-facet model held only in the subsample with meditation experience. Observe was also unexpectedly and positively correlated with dissociation, absentmindedness, psychological symptoms, and thought suppression in that sample. In a follow-up across four samples, Baer et al. (2008) found that Observe's correlation with psychological symptoms was $+.21$ among students, nonsignificant in community and highly educated non-meditating samples, and $-.48$ among experienced meditators, while facets such as Nonjudge were consistently negative across all four groups. Observe likewise correlated with

psychological well-being only in meditators and had no incremental validity over the other facets in predicting well-being. Even among experienced meditators, where the hierarchical model fit, the four other facets jointly accounted for only 24–41% of the variance in any given facet, leaving most of each facet’s variance unshared.

The field has tolerated this heterogeneity while continuing to treat all five facets as components of a single construct, typically by appeal to the plausible idea that observing functions differently once one has learned to observe non-judgmentally. That accommodation is reasonable. But it establishes a standard: weak or unstable covariance among components is not, on its own, taken to show that a component falls outside the construct. Applied consistently, the same standard implies that the LMS’s failure to covary with FFMQ-family items in one undergraduate sample cannot, on its own, show that Langerian mindfulness falls outside the construct either.

The Karl and Fischer (2020) Result in Context

Three features of the Karl and Fischer (2020) study are relevant. Earlier conceptual and psychometric comparisons also distinguish the traditions (Andrei et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2013; Siegling & Petrides, 2014), but we focus on Karl and Fischer (2020) because it is the empirical evidence Chems-Maarif et al. cite to justify the exclusion. First, the sample comprised 399 undergraduate students, the population in which the FFMQ’s own Observe facet has repeatedly failed to cohere with the other facets. Second, the replication of the five-facet structure was itself partial: Non-judging and Non-reacting collapsed into a single factor. Third, in the unfolding component structure reported by the authors, the LMS items were most closely associated with the Describe facet at earlier stages and separated into their own component only when six components were extracted; the authors note that Describe had shown the strongest positive

correlations with the LMS in earlier validation work (Pirson et al., 2018). None of this impugns the study, which is careful and transparent. It does suggest that the result is better read as “LMS items form their own cluster among undergraduates when enough components are extracted” than as “Langerian mindfulness is a different construct.”

Self-Report Measures of Mindfulness Are Widely Acknowledged to Be Limited

There is broad agreement in the field that self-report questionnaires capture mindfulness incompletely and with systematic distortion (Bergomi et al., 2013; Grossman, 2008, 2011; Grossman & Van Dam, 2011; Van Dam et al., 2018). The core difficulty is that mindfulness is largely non-declarative: asking people how aware, flexible, or non-judgmental they are yields a report of their beliefs about those capacities, filtered through the very metacognitive limitations that mindfulness is supposed to address. Grossman (2011) makes the point sharply in observing that some instruments effectively define mindfulness by how poorly respondents think they pay attention. Individuals with little contemplative or reflective experience may lack the reference points needed to rate themselves accurately, and, as the Observe findings above illustrate, item semantics can shift with experience. These concerns have motivated calls for behavioral and performance-based assessment (Hadash & Bernstein, 2019), and they apply to the LMS and the FFMQ alike. On our reading, when two self-report instruments built from different item pools fail to covary in a sample of undergraduates, the most parsimonious explanations concern the instruments and the sample before they concern the constructs.

The LMS Is Itself Psychometrically Contested

Finally, the LMS is not an uncontroversial operationalization of Langer’s construct. Haigh et al. (2011) failed to replicate the original four-factor structure of the 21-item scale, finding instead a two-factor mindfulness/mindlessness solution and support for a one-factor nine-

item model. The subsequently published 14-item version dropped the Flexibility subscale and retained Novelty Seeking, Novelty Producing, and Engagement (Pirson et al., 2018). Langer's own experimental work has typically relied on behavioral and performance signatures of mindful engagement rather than on questionnaire scores, and the socio-cognitive construct, which encompasses sensitivity to context and the active drawing of novel distinctions, is broader than any current self-report scale captures. Whatever the LMS's merits, its factor separation from FFMQ-family measures could reflect its own measurement properties as readily as construct-level distinctness.

Taken together, these considerations do not show that Langerian and Buddhist-inspired mindfulness are the same construct. They show that the factor-analytic evidence cited for excluding the former is weak evidence of conceptual independence. To establish independence, one would want convergent and discriminant validity against theoretically predicted outcomes, behavioral and experimental paradigms that do not depend on self-report, and samples with sufficient reflective experience for self-descriptions to be meaningful.

The Internal Stability of the Buddhist-Inspired Category: Kabat-Zinn and MBSR as an Illustrative Case

The second, independent line of argument concerns the category from which Chems-Maarif et al. synthesize their definition. If the Buddhist-inspired conceptualizations were themselves homogeneous and stable, excluding a construct that lies outside them would be tidy. We suggest that they are less stable than presented, and we use Kabat-Zinn and MBSR to illustrate why. We choose this case not because Kabat-Zinn speaks for the field, which he does not, but because MBSR is the prototype and most widely disseminated of the mindfulness-based programs (Crane et al., 2017; Creswell, 2017), the template for MBCT and its many derivatives,

and the program whose training targets the FFMQ-family measures were designed to capture. The FFMQ was assembled from five earlier questionnaires, and its facets were validated explicitly as skills cultivated through mindfulness meditation practice of the kind MBSR teaches (Baer et al., 2006, 2008).

Limits of the Case

Kabat-Zinn is a clinician and teacher, and his definitions are avowedly operational rather than scientific. He has described his best-known definition as “operational, not definitive and absolute,” intended as “a koan of sorts” (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 8), and the field has long regarded his formulations as insufficiently precise for research purposes; the Bishop et al. (2004) consensus definition was motivated in part by that concern, and definitional heterogeneity remains a central methodological problem (Van Dam et al., 2018). The refined definition of Chems-Maarif et al. rests primarily on Bishop et al. (2004), a multi-author consensus statement, not on Kabat-Zinn’s teaching voice. The evidence we assemble below is therefore suggestive rather than dispositive, and any reader could assemble other quotations pointing in other directions. To mitigate this, we draw on sources spanning three decades and several genres, and we anchor the case not only in interviews but in the most recent MBSR curriculum guide (Koerbel et al., 2025), a document revised extensively by Kabat-Zinn and vetted by an international group of senior MBSR teachers, which represents the applied consensus of that tradition more faithfully than any individual statement can.

Non-Dual Roots and What Has Actually Changed

It is important to be precise about what we are and are not claiming. Scholarship on MBSR’s origins has established that the program was never a straightforward translation of Theravāda satipaṭṭhāna. Kabat-Zinn’s (2011) own account of MBSR’s origins cites Sōtō and

Rinzai Zen, Vedānta, Krishnamurti, and Ramana Maharshi alongside Theravāda sources; Dunne (2011) argues that the non-dual traditions offer a more apt comparison for MBSR than mainstream Abhidharma accounts; and Husgafvel (2018) documents in detail the Mahāyāna and non-dual influences on Kabat-Zinn’s “universal dharma” framing. Elsewhere in the same literature, Dreyfus (2011) argues on Abhidharma grounds that mindfulness is not well characterized as merely present-centered and non-judgmental, since it involves retention and evaluative discernment, and Gethin (2011) surveys the plurality of canonical definitions. An emphasis on innate awareness is therefore not a late addition to MBSR; it was latent in the program’s sources from the start.

What has changed, on our reading, is not the underlying view but what is foregrounded in explicit definition and public teaching. The definitions that entered the psychological-science literature in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2003) and that anchored Bishop et al. (2004) emphasized attention, present-centeredness, and non-judgment. The elements now emphasized alongside them in Kabat-Zinn’s later books and interviews (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, 2018, 2025) and in the current curriculum are different in kind. The 2025 curriculum guide instructs teachers, when introducing the operational definition in Class One, to “highlight: Awareness; Innate, human capacity; Heartfulness; Wakefulness; Relationality” (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 33), and states that “for MBSR to be MBSR, it has to be grounded in an understanding of non-duality and non-striving on the part of the instructor” (p. 4). This is the tradition’s own account of itself, and although a psychological-science definition need not exhaust a pedagogical tradition, the gap complicates using that tradition as a stable boundary for exclusion. Our claim is thus about the gap between the tradition’s explicit self-description and the definition synthesized from its scientific operationalizations, not about a conversion in Kabat-Zinn’s private views.

Three Elements That Parallel Langer's Account

First, *innateness*. Langer has held since 1978 that mindfulness is the natural state of an engaged mind and that mindlessness, the rigid use of categories formed earlier, is what requires explanation (Chanowitz & Langer, 1981). Kabat-Zinn now describes awareness as a basic human inheritance rather than an acquired skill, and the curriculum lists “innate, human capacity” as a dimension of the definition itself. The structural shape of the argument is the same: the obstacle is automaticity; mindfulness is what remains when the obstacle is removed. We acknowledge that Kabat-Zinn’s “pure awareness” language belongs to a contemplative register closer to *rigpa* than to any psychological operationalization, and our point concerns structure, not lineage.

Second, *ordinary life*. Langer’s studies never required participants to meditate; the intervention was always an instruction to notice, vary, or attend to process in an ordinary setting (Langer, 1989, 2009; Langer et al., 1978). The 2025 curriculum states that beginning with an eating meditation “underscores that meditative awareness can be natural and ordinary, an everyday, every moment experience,” that “life itself, and how we live it, is the real meditation practice” (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 29), and it assigns as home practice a routine daily activity performed with full awareness, noting that it “does not have to be done slowly” (p. 49). Informal practice was always part of MBSR, and comparable everyday-mindfulness instructions have long histories in Zen and Theravāda contexts; what is notable is the weight the curriculum now places on ordinariness as a defining feature rather than a supplement to formal practice.

Third, *fresh perception*. Beginner’s mind was one of seven attitudinal foundations listed in *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2013, pp. 19–38), alongside non-judging, patience, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. Several of these, notably non-striving and letting go, are themselves Langer-compatible, since they describe the relaxation of premature

commitment to outcomes and categories. But beginner's mind has risen in prominence: it organizes *Mindfulness for Beginners* (Kabat-Zinn, 2012), and the current curriculum invites teachers to name “the possibility of seeing oneself – and others – with fresh eyes” (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 28). Langer's central instruction is to draw novel distinctions within the familiar; Kabat-Zinn's is to see the familiar as if for the first time. The verbs differ, but the cognitive operation, suspending a stored category so that what it hides becomes visible, is the same.

Pedagogical Convergence: The Raisin and the Nine-Dot Puzzle

The founding pedagogy of MBSR offers evidence that does not depend on the interview record. From the program's first session in 1979, participants have been handed a raisin and asked to attend to it as if they had never seen one before. The current curriculum specifies that the instructor “bends over backward not to name them with the word ‘raisins’” and invites participants to engage the object “as a Martian scientist might” (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 36). Operationally, this is the Langerian instruction to draw novel distinctions about a familiar object: the exercise works by suspending the stored category and letting the participant notice what the category had been hiding.

A second exercise makes the affinity more explicit. The nine-dot puzzle, in which participants must connect nine dots with four straight lines without lifting the pencil, appears in *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2013, pp. 181–184) and is incorporated in the current curriculum as an optional home assignment after Class One, unpacked in Class Two under the theme “perception and creative responding” (Koerbel et al., 2025, pp. 41–47). The teaching point is that “there is, in fact, no box! We impose the limit on ourselves. We fabricate ‘the box’ in our own mind” (p. 43). This is a textbook illustration of premature cognitive commitment and its release. Where the raisin exercise demonstrates Langerian noticing through sensory attention, the

nine-dot puzzle demonstrates it through cognitive reorganization. We note that the nine-dot exercise is optional and that we cannot document its use in 1979; our historical claim rests on the raisin.

Nonetheless, a shared exercise does not entail a shared experience. In MBSR the raisin is embedded in psychoeducation about interconnectedness, present-moment awareness, and the automaticity of mind, and is used to transition into the body scan; a Langerian framing would embed the same activity in language about categories, novelty, and flexibility, and would follow it with further noticing tasks rather than formal meditation. The two framings may well produce different downstream experiences and effects, and this is the kind of question that comparative research could answer. Our point is simple: the instructional operation at the core of the exercise is the same in both traditions, which is difficult to reconcile with the view that the underlying constructs are effectively unrelated.

Conceptually Related, Operationally Distinct?

There is a middle position between the exclusion adopted by Chems-Maarif et al. and the wholesale incorporation of Langer's construct that we are not proposing. On this view, mindfulness is a multifaceted phenomenon, and the Langerian and Buddhist-inspired traditions may describe overlapping aspects of it while remaining usefully distinct at the level of operationalization, for reasons of construct and discriminant validity in intervention research. A researcher evaluating a mindfulness-based intervention has good reason to want a measure whose content tracks the intervention's own training targets; one evaluating a Langerian intervention has the same reason. Keeping the measures distinct for this purpose does not require any claim about what mindfulness "really" is.

We think this position is defensible, and it is compatible with everything we have argued. The Langerian construct can be understood as one important facet of a broader phenomenon rather than as its primary description, and the pragmatic case for separate measures can be made openly. What we resist is the slide from operational separation to conceptual exclusion, in which a measurement convenience is presented as an empirical finding about the boundaries of the construct. Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) offer a definition of what mindfulness is for psychological science; if the exclusion of Langer is pragmatic, it should be stated as such.

One apparent difference between the traditions is also less sharp than it first appears. The non-judgmental clause central to Bishop et al. (2004) is absent from Langer's vocabulary, but non-judgment can be understood as one form of the cognitive flexibility Langer emphasizes. To refrain from immediately evaluating an experience as good or bad, threatening or benign, is to loosen the grip of a single premature category and remain open to alternative construals. Kabat-Zinn's own gloss on the clause, that "we suspend judgment as best we can, moment by moment, and then notice how impossible that actually is to do" (Koerbel et al., 2025, p. 8), describes a noticing of categorization in action. In this sense, non-judgment and flexible thinking may name different aspects of the same operation, and Dreyfus's (2011) argument that mindfulness involves evaluative discernment suggests that the Buddhist-inspired tradition itself does not treat non-judgment as the absence of discrimination.

Conclusion and a Constructive Path Forward

Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) is a valuable contribution, and the refined definition they propose will likely move the field forward. We have argued for one amendment to its scope. The factor-analytic evidence offered for excluding Langer's construct is weak evidence of conceptual independence: the FFMQ's own facets do not reliably cohere in the kind of sample used, self-

report measures of mindfulness are widely acknowledged to be limited, and the LMS is itself psychometrically contested. Independently, the Buddhist-inspired category from which the definition is synthesized is less stable than presented, as illustrated by the gap between MBSR's current self-description, which foregrounds innate capacity, ordinary-life awareness, and fresh perception, and the definition abstracted from its scientific operationalizations. The two traditions may be conceptually related yet usefully kept operationally distinct; that position is compatible with our argument, and we would welcome it being stated openly.

The more constructive conclusion is that the relationship between Langerian and Buddhist-inspired mindfulness is an empirical question that has barely been studied. Very few studies have administered both kinds of measures to samples with sufficient contemplative or reflective experience for self-report to be meaningful, examined convergent and discriminant validity against theoretically predicted outcomes, or compared Langerian and mindfulness-based interventions directly on shared outcomes and on behavioral rather than questionnaire indices of mindfulness. Such studies would tell us whether the two traditions are describing one phenomenon, two, or overlapping regions of a larger space. Until they are done, the Langerian construct deserves a seat at the table where mindfulness is defined.

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