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# Mindful co-optations?

## Exploring the responses of mindfulness teachers to the risk of co-optation

To say that we push a lot of the risks and responsibilities unto the individual (...) is very true. (...) It's a consistent trend, and there is very much to it. I do think, however, that the role of mindfulness in that structure is more nuanced. (Mathew)

This idea that mindfulness is navel gazing, you know, that it's all some narcissistic thing about me and my mind, me and my mind. That's a very easy and maybe obvious idea to form, but it bears no relation to how the practice actually is. (Pauline)

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### Introduction

The critique raised against mindfulness meditation for posing as a respite from the stressful tensions of late capitalism, while in actuality functioning as its perfect ideological supplement (e.g. Žižek, 2009: 66) – a supine “McMindfulness” (Purser, 2019a) – is not lost on mindfulness teachers, as the above quotes illustrate. Critical scholars have thus highlighted how mindfulness meditation serves to reinforce the status quo by failing to question the structural causes of the suffering it seeks to alleviate (du Plessis and Just, 2022). This critique, which in recent years has also been disseminated to popular audiences, (Brinkmann, 2017; Cederström and Spicer, 2015, Purser, 2019a) is accordingly no longer unfamiliar to its object.

What the critical scholars are pointing to can, in a word, be described as *co-optation*, understood as the process in which practices, that purport to constitute a critique of - or liberation from - the established order, are appropriated and “swallowed up” (Marcuse, 1969: 3) so as to serve as a reinforcement of that very order. By “accept[ing] the rules of the game” (ibid: 2) and submitting their emancipatory potential to the rationality and logics of the established order, such practices end up reinforcing the system they purport to resist, which is exactly the allegation levelled against mindfulness meditation:

“(...) its revolutionary rhetoric is a myth. Even if it makes us feel better, the causes of suffering in the world remain unchanged” (Purser, 2019a: 241).

As such, this paper is an investigation of how practitioners respond to the risk of co-optation. It begins from the observation that the critical analysis mentioned above, while relevant and insightful, is no longer revelatory to meditation teachers - pulling back the ideological curtain, as it were. Instead, most acknowledge it as a challenge, and basic condition of their work. This also implies that any assumptions of naiveté, or even false consciousness, on the part of meditation practitioners are put aside in favor of a curious approach to their responses to the risk of co-optation. Consequently, the paper will study these responses and use them as a springboard for a conceptual discussion of the idea of co-optation, which often tends to imply a somewhat monolithic conception of capitalism and a concomitant dichotomous binary between emancipation and co-optation. The discussion will subsequently explore

the notion of co-optation (or lack thereof) across different registers, and develop a typology including the notions of ‘intellectual co-optation’, ‘inverse co-optation’ and ‘empty co-optation’. These concepts may in turn contribute to widening our vocabulary around the concept of co-optation and the phenomenon of mindfulness meditation in organizations.

The paper begins by clarifying its use of the term mindfulness, before surveying existing research on mindfulness and co-optation. This is followed by a section on methodology and empirical material, which leads to the findings section, in which three general responses to the risk of co-optation are outlined. In the subsequent section these are then conceptualized as three different types of co-optation. These ideal-types are eventually summed up in the concluding discussion.

### **Mindfulness meditation**

The term *mindfulness* has Buddhist roots, and is a translation of the Pali term *sati*, which, among other things, connotes “awareness”, “attention” and “remembering” (Siegel et al., 2009: 18). It is first described in the *Satipatthana Sutta* (Bodhi, 1995) which teaches the four foundations of mindfulness as “the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of pain and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana [eg. *Nirvana*]” (ibid: 145). The four foundations of mindfulness described in this text are the body (senses, changes in posture, activities), feelings (senses of pleasantness, unpleasantness and neutrality), the mind (moods, attitudes), and the objects of mind (the senses, but also states such as volition, equanimity, tranquility etc.). Mindfulness is most often associated with the formal practice of mindfulness meditation (Shapiro et al., 2006: 374) – often referred to as the ‘heart’ of Buddhist meditation (see eg. Thera, 1962). Rooted in eastern contemplative traditions, mindfulness meditation has proliferated through Western countries since the late 1970’s (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and is now practiced everywhere from large meditation centers such as Plum Village<sup>1</sup> to organizations like Google<sup>2</sup> and activist groups like Extinction Rebellion<sup>3</sup>. In addition, a plethora of apps such as *Calm* and *Headspace* offer the practice to millions of users worldwide.

Because of this history, and because the concept of mindfulness refers to an internal state that is difficult to observe and describe, a consensual definition has been elusive (Good et al., 2016: 117). This paper accordingly operates with a fairly broad understanding of mindfulness as a mode of (meta-)cognition that is undistracted, accepting and (ultimately) non-conceptual. Being mindful is thus not a matter of *thinking* more clearly about experience; but about *experiencing* more clearly – including the arising of thoughts themselves (see Chiesa, 2013; Harris, 2014). In conjunction with this broad definition of mindfulness, there are a variety of different practices that may be applied in cultivating it, inducing various Vipassana, Zen and Metta practices (with the latter being more oriented towards *loving-kindness*) including both dual and non-dual approaches (Dunne, 2013). In their current westernized use, there are not necessarily sharp and explicit distinctions between these practice-traditions, as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://plumvillage.org/community/monastic-practice-centres/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://siyli.org/about/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://xrbuddhists.com/>

contemporary programs (and indeed many of the teachers interviewed for this study) often teach their own idiosyncratic hybrid.<sup>4</sup>

### **Mindfulness as co-optation**

While the term mindfulness is thus taken to mean many different things, and consequently studied in a variety of different contexts (Badham and King, 2021), this paper takes its departure in a strand of critical literature, which, more or less explicitly, conceptualizes it through the figure of co-optation. An emblematic example of this is Purser (2019b) who claims, that while mindfulness practices can have liberatory potentials “the way they’re being deployed is a neoliberal cooptation, where they are then refashioned as performance enhancement methods in alignment with institutional goals, whether it’s a corporation or the military.” While “cloaked in an aura of care and humanity” mindfulness meditation in this reading thus actually functions as “a trendy method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo (...)”. Similarly, Kucinskas (2019: 192) points to the risk of “cultural co-optation” in which mindfulness teachers bend the practice to fit the “motivations, interests and perceived constraints of those they want to recruit” (ibid.) thereby watering down its transformative capacities and reinforcing ingrained institutional cultures. Through the lens of co-optation, the recent proliferation of mindfulness meditation into organizations is consequently seen as an example of how “capitalism continuously assimilates its own critique” (Saari and Harni, 2016: 101) and utilizes the “emancipatory strategies” (ibid: 101) and “highest forms of human existence” (ibid: 99) as a means of generating profit. Mindfulness meditation, then “ends up reproducing the very things that drive people to seek relief – but it helps people better adjust to those things” (Forbes, 2019: 23). Ultimately, therefore it functions as a “a social opium that serves to cover up social changes” (Madsen, 2015: 74).

A number of scholars show this co-optation through a discursive framework, in which mindfulness is understood as an “empty signifier” (Islam, Holm and Karjalainen, 2022), which can be infused with meaning from a variety of different discourses (Karjalainen, Islam and Holm, 2021, see also Carette and King, 2004: 17). Many thus point to the way in which mindfulness meditation is merged with neoliberal self-improvement discourses (see eg. du Plessis and Sørensen, 2017; du Plessis, 2021; 2022) to promote “an exaggerated faith in what is up to oneself and an insufficient faith in our possibility to change things outside of the self” (Madsen, 2015: 75)<sup>5</sup>. This “individualizing impetus, diverting systemic critique” (Islam et al., 2022: 21) is by some even described as “cruel” (Cederström and Spicer, 2015: 25) because it individualizes structural conditions. Co-optation here is accordingly a discursive strategy in which the hegemonic discourse expands its chain of equivalence to incorporate counter-discursive elements, thereby curbing any antagonisms that threaten its hegemonic status (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Crucially, this incorporation does not alter the dominant discourse, nor its concomitant institutions, in any substantial way. In terms of mindfulness meditation, then, this translates to the analysis that companies may well offer mindfulness programs and cloak them in liberatory terms such

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<sup>4</sup> The formal practice of mindfulness meditation is often accompanied by ‘teachings’ (ranging from the technical to the moral/ethical/spiritual). While some teachers and scholars attribute these with particular importance vis a vis co-optation, others – as this study will show – explicitly do not. For analytical reasons, this discursive dimension comprised of teachings and ethical frameworks, is accordingly not included in the definition of mindfulness applied in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> For a similar co-optation argument regarding the practice of yoga, see Munir, Ansari and Brown (2021).

as kindness and compassion. This, however, does not affect their ultimate purpose, which, according to this reading, is almost always to increase the productivity of the individual employee.

While such discursive co-optation is the dominant analytical figure in the critical research, newer studies have begun to suggest that the critique of mindfulness meditation as “selfish” may have been overblown (Kucinskias and Stewart, 2022) and that new approaches to conceptualizing its transformative potential are needed (du Plessis and Just, 2022; Dahlman, du Plessis, Husted and Just, 2022). A number of studies have thus explored the role of mindfulness meditation in transformative social movements. Rowe (2016), drawing on data from Occupy Wall Street, has conceptualized mindfulness meditation as a technique of the self, which, when applied in activist movements who embed it in an ethico-political analysis, can be deployed in the service of radical change (see also Chari, 2016). Similarly, Schmid and Aiken (2020: 4) investigate the “co-occurrence of eco-social activism and mindfulness” as something distinct from “neoliberal cooptation”. Moving to more mainstream organizations, Zaidman (2020) has studied “self-spirituality” and identified two “feminine modes of incorporation” as alternatives to the “domesticated mode of masculine incorporation”. While the latter is largely synonymous with cooptation, the former can be lived as “individual wisdom” and “present as a revolutionary alternative to organizations” (Zaidman, 2020: 19). On the level of more general theory, Doran (2017) proposes mindfulness meditation as an indispensable practice for reclaiming our time and attention from the forces of neoliberal governmentality. According to this analysis, the transformative potential of mindfulness meditation thus lies in recovering ‘the mindful commons’ from the forces of capitalization in our current economy of attention. In contrast to the more discursive and institutional approaches, many of these somewhat affirmative accounts tend to understand mindfulness meditation as a ‘mind-body’ practice and consequently focus on concepts such as attention, consciousness and corporeality. Seeking to contribute to both the well-established accounts of co-optation and the more marginal affirmative accounts outlined above, this paper explores the responses of experienced mindfulness teachers to the risk of cooptation with the aim of developing a more multi-faceted account of what (might) actually happen(s) when organizational subjects practice mindfulness meditation.

### **Co-optation**

Co-optation in the general sense of preempting or disarming of ones’ opponents by ‘taking them over’ or ‘swallowing them up’ has entered the sociological vocabulary only as recently as the 1960s (Kenshur, 1993: 8). Selznicks (1948) investigation of the Tennessee Valley Authority and Marcuses (1963) account of “repressive tolerance” are foundational texts in this regard (see also Chiapello, 2004). The concept is widely used in studies of management and organization (eg. Andersson and Liff, 2018; Tyler and Vachhani, 2021) and defined in a recent paper as “the ability of the established economic order to respond to new radical challenges and challengers by altering their foundations” (Ul-Haq et al., 2022: 4). Furthermore, the term denotes how capitalism allows emancipatory ideas to be voiced, since the processes of co-optation can not only effectively paralyze their transformative possibilities but also monopolize them (ibid.). As such, the accounts of co-optation in relation to mindfulness meditation tend to invoke the idea of “*structural co-optation*” (Keshnur, 1993: 10), in which intrinsically oppositional or emancipatory ideas are allowed to be voiced while being rendered impotent due to their placement in the larger structure of power. Some accounts arguably even border on what Kenshur (1993: 12) describes as “absolute structural co-optation”. Here, the concept of cooptation begins to resemble that

of an all-encompassing ideology, where extra-ideological positions are illusory, and escape impossible (Kenshur, 1993: 12). As noted by Jameson (2003: 74) among others, it thus becomes “easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism”.

Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) have criticized this influential approach within leftist thought as being “capitalocentric”, in that it implies a dichotomous binary between non-capitalism and capitalism, construing the latter as a hegemonic monolith. Instead, they introduce the notion of “diverse economies” in an attempt to nuance the widespread

“assertions that capitalism *really* is the major force in contemporary life, that its dominance is not a discursive object but a reality that can’t simply be ‘thought away’, that it has no outside and thus any so-called alternatives are actually part of the new liberal, patriarchal, corporate capitalist global order (...)” (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 2)

As such, they show how the economy is full of what can be described as non-capitalist forms of organization such as state-owned enterprises, worker-cooperatives and microfinance. But also household work, hunting/fishing, and even slavery and theft, arguably circumvent traditional notions of capitalism. According to Gibson-Graham, then, the economy is best described as *diverse* – comprised of many different forms of (non)capitalism – as opposed to binary (capitalist/non-capitalist).

Crucially for the purpose of this paper, this diagnosis also changes the game with regard to co-optation. As such, the assumption that alternatives to the dominant order of capitalism are almost invariably “naïve, utopian, already co-opted” (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 3) appears in need of further investigation. In the concluding discussion, the paper accordingly leverages the findings from the analysis in order to explore potential dynamics of ‘intellectual’, ‘inverse’ and ‘empty’ co-optation within the context of mindfulness meditation. Before that the following sections will present the methodology and findings of the study.

## **Methodology and empirical material**

The empirical material for this study was produced through 26 qualitative interviews with mindfulness teachers and ethnographic observations from an 8-week mindfulness course. This section introduces the empirical material and how it was analyzed.

### *Interviews*

The mindfulness teachers interviewed were recruited through an initial contact of the author and subsequently through chain-referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) in which existing informants suggested future informants from their network. The interviews were conducted during 2020 and 2021, and due to covid-19 lockdowns, most retreats and physical classes were canceled, which meant the teachers were generally relatively easy to make appointments with for online interviews. The online format furthermore allowed for a wide geographical distribution, as the interviewed teachers were situated in the U.S (7), U.K. (4) Denmark (3), Israel (3), France, (3), Germany (2), India (2), Canada (1) and Spain (1), respectively. 10 were female and 16 were male. About a third of the interviewees were employed as mindfulness teachers in corporate settings, a third were employed in large meditation centers, and a third were freelancing in various settings as well as hosting their own

retreats and mindfulness classes. These categories overlap significantly, however, and most were affiliated with and/or had previous experience from more than one. Around half were also engaged in some type of activism ranging from arranging LGBTQ+/BIPOC-meditation groups in their community to involvement in movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street or various non-violence initiatives. In Appendix 1, which provides an overview of the informants, the formal training of the teachers is divided into three categories. The first category, *Monasteries*, refers to long (often multi-year) stays at monasteries, ashrams or hermitages - typically in India, Nepal or Thailand. For some this also involved longer stays in caves or forests. The second category *Meditation centers* refers to teaching and/or training programs at large places like Spirit Rock or Insight Meditation Center in the U.S., but also smaller centers. Finally, the last category *MBSR-certification*, refers to certified MBSR-teachers. Again, these categories overlap for most of the informants, as do the different traditions they draw upon in their teaching (Zen, Vipassana, etc.).

The interviews lasted between 32 and 83 minutes - typically around one hour<sup>6</sup>. Besides being a researcher, I introduced myself to the teachers as a semi-experienced mindfulness meditator and described how the combination of these two had led to my research interest in the transformative potentials of the practice on both an individual and societal level. I also promised the informants anonymity<sup>7</sup>. A few teachers were initially a bit guarded, asking me to further clarify my intentions, and probing into my own experiences with mindfulness meditation, but would typically open up once I did so. I suspect that my relative familiarity with, and phenomenological understanding of, the practice of mindfulness meditation contributed to the generally good rapport that characterized the interviews.

The initial questions of the interview would typically be about background; how the teachers got into mindfulness meditation, how they would define these two terms, what their average workday looked like and so on. The interview would then move on to key questions such as: “*What is the relationship between mindfulness meditation and social transformation?*” “*What does mindfulness ‘do’ when introduced into an individual/ social body?*” “*Is mindfulness meditation always a ‘good’ thing, or can it be employed in the service of ‘the bad’?*” As mentioned in the introduction, the teachers were generally quite reflective about these issues, and some of the interviews accordingly went on to discuss topics like the relationship between mindfulness meditation and capitalism and the broader political landscape during Covid19. The interviews were continued until a certain level of saturation was reached, and the answers given began to feel recognizable and redundant (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).

While studies of mindfulness meditation typically focus on the subjects of mindfulness teaching (Eberth and Sedlmeier, 2012) or participants in mindfulness programs (eg; Karjalainen et al., 2021), mindfulness teachers have received significantly less attention. One might suspect, however, that they could provide different perspectives than their students, and as such we might view them as specialists - or even “*experts*” (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2009). All the interviewed teachers have thus received extensive formal training (see appendix 1), and thus arguably acquired a level of knowledge about

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<sup>6</sup> All interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of the three teachers from Denmark, who were interviewed in Danish. No significant language barriers were encountered during the interviews, and most, if not all, the international teachers taught classes in English.

<sup>7</sup> The names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

mindfulness meditation which significantly exceeds that of the layman or average meditator. Contrary to other groups commonly categorized as experts - most notably managers and politicians (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018: 7) – mindfulness teachers however tend to inhabit less powerful social positions, as many are in precarious employment relationships or live off donations. On the other hand, the teachers are generally accustomed to the unwavering attention and dedication of their pupils, and enjoy a certain social status within their communities. Their expert-status was also evident in the interviews, where I was often struck by their ability to put articulate the subtle, abstract and non-conceptual aspects of their practice. This eloquence is deliberately reflected in the copious use of quotations in the findings-section. My role as an interviewer thus quite naturally became that of a student, which in a sense can be described as “studying up” (Plesner, 2011). Several authors have noted how asymmetrical interviews are not generally problematic (Abels and Behrens, 2009; Bogner et al., 2009) as the concomitant open and somewhat naïve questions, like the ones mentioned above, often lead to the most interesting and productive answers. Hence, such questions are particularly useful when the purpose of the interview theory-development (Bogner et al., 2018: 12), which was indeed the aim here. Bogner et al. (2018: 10) thus describe how the *theory-generating expert interview* seeks to “communicatively open up and analytically reconstruct the subjective dimension of knowledge” (ibid.). The aim of the researcher in this type of interview is accordingly to:

(...) formulate a theoretically rich conceptualization of (often implicit, yet reconstructible) knowledge, conceptions of the world and routines, which the experts (...) develop in their activities and which are constitutive for the functioning of social systems. In ideal terms, this procedure seeks to generate theory via the interpretative generalization of a typology (...) (Bogner et al., 2018: 10)

As such, this aim matches the way in which this paper uses the interviews as a springboard for developing a typology of co-optations in relation to mindfulness meditation in organizations.

### *Ethnographic observations*

The ethnographic observations took place in an 8-week course in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) running from January to March 2020, and function primarily as background and supplement to the interviews. MBSR was chosen due to its status as the most established and widely proliferated mindfulness meditation program in the western world (Reb and Choi, 2014). In addition, it can be viewed as something of a “Black Swan”- case (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 228), in the sense of being perhaps the most commonly used example of structural co-optation in critical accounts of mindfulness (see eg. Forbes, 2019: 14-24; Purser, 2019a: 65-82) and as such among the more likely places to encounter it. While thus being a favorable case for the notion of structural co-optation, the primary aim of the fieldwork was to diversify my own experience of what mindfulness meditation ‘does’ when introduced to a group of people in a relatively systematic, as my previous experience came primarily from taking courses at various meditation centers. Participating in the course thus added to my own personal experience of what practicing mindfulness meditation feels like. In general, my previous knowledge of the practice allowed me to better understand and relate to what the mindfulness teachers said in the interviews, and also fed into the subsequent theorizing while conducting the analysis. Fieldnotes were recorded after each teaching-session along with a running diary.

### *Analysis of empirical material*



The interviews began with a certain practically and theoretically informed ambivalence about the relationship between mindfulness meditation and social transformation, which was conveyed to the informants as the motivation behind the interview (see du Plessis and Just, 2022). As such, the study was abductive from the outset (Charmaz, 2006), as the “researchers pre-understanding, including his or her academic framework(s)” was used, “as a tool that opens up a dialogue with the empirical material” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 1269). An interesting research problem, in this view, is one that offers “high potential for an empirical response” (ibid: 1268). I was thus quite surprised by how familiar the informants were with questions of social transformation and in particular accounts that were critical of their practice in this regard. This initial surprise might be understood as a “breakdown” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 1266) between theoretical assumptions of false consciousness, lack of knowledge or indifference about the role of mindfulness meditation in social transformation on the one hand, and an empirical impression on the other, which was one of substantial reflexivity around these issues. This breakdown subsequently fostered the idea that the mindfulness teachers might be able to qualify my initial ambivalence and spur on further theorizing. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007: 1266) accordingly stress how theory-development is facilitated through a selective interest in “what does *not* work in existing theory” so as to encourage interpretations “that allow a productive and non-commonsensual understanding of an ambiguous social reality”. This again fed into a general idea about what to look for when going through the empirical material (all interviews were transcribed with *Konch Transcription*); namely reflections on the relationship between mindfulness meditation and social transformation - in particular those that deviate from existing accounts. This was followed by several close (re-)readings of the interview transcriptions in back-and-forth conjunction with theories – most notably co-optation literature, mindfulness research and new materialism theory. This eventually led to reframing the gathered ‘reflections’ as *responses* to the risk of co-optation. When employing this framing in a 2<sup>nd</sup> order analysis (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013) a few broad, but distinct, ideal types emerged. These ideal types tended to crystalize around a few key questions, namely the extent to which the proliferation of corporate mindfulness programs in recent years should be viewed as a positive development, and/or if mindfulness meditation is always ‘a good thing’. Crucially, many teachers also stressed the paradoxical nature, or even “mystery”, of mindfulness meditation in this regard, and pointed to the wisdom in accepting that several conflicting interpretations might be simultaneously valid. As such there are many grey areas between the three ideal-typical responses that were ultimately distilled from the empirical material, and which are illustrated with plentiful quotations in the following findings section. A further reading of these responses in conjunction with different theories eventually led to the subsequent conceptual discussion of how the responses might be developed into a tentative typology of co-optations.

## Findings

The following section presents three general responses given by the mindfulness teachers to the risk of co-optation. Some teachers accordingly view it as (1) *a question of intention* in which mindfulness meditation can be framed in different ways, which may enhance or curb its transformative potential. As such, co-optation by the powers that be can in principle be avoided with the right framing of the practice. Others contend that the transformative potential of the practice is, at least to a degree, independent of discursive and institutional framings, and that co-optation is not necessarily something to be feared. To the contrary, mindfulness meditation can in this view potentially work as (2) *a Trojan*

*horse*; discursively co-opted and dressed up in the trappings of productivity and less sick days, while subtly changing the organization from within through non-discursive layers of being. Finally, some teachers perceive the question of (non) co-optation as misguided, as it exaggerates the transformative potential of the practice to the point of an (3) *overblown promise*. These findings prompt a subsequent conceptual discussion, in which the notions of (1) *intellectual co-optation*, (2) *inverse co-optation* and (3) *empty co-optation* are suggested as means for theoretically explaining the three general responses of the mindfulness teachers and as nuancing supplements to the prevailing concept of *structural co-optation*.

#### *A question of intention*

I think that intention is the main thing in meditation. And the intention for which we meditate in this world sometimes is, I find shallow. (...) I sense that sometimes meditation is used so that the children in school or the workers at work can kind of deal with stress. But it's also a way to keep growing in a situation where what is inducing the stress should be questioned and not only learned to cope with. So that's one danger, I think. Yeah, it's the intention. (Stefan)

For some of the interviewed mindfulness teachers, the question of co-optation is a question of how the practice is framed – or of its intention, as stated in the quote above. In this view, the practice of mindfulness meditation can consequently be framed in a variety of different ways, and can consequently serve a multitude of purposes. In one telling example, a teacher described how she travelled to several Asian monasteries wanting to ordain and found them to be “extremely sexist and homophobic”:

And it didn't make any sense to me; that we would talk about awakening AND institutionalize sexism and homophobia at the same time in the way the monasteries were relating to that community. So, from that experience, and working with very realized masters, it became clear to me that it is actually dangerous to frame mindfulness individually. Because it allows relationships of harming, outside of the individual, institutionally and culturally (...) it allows them to continue to do business in the misunderstanding that they are doing everything they need. (Marian)

Another example of how the wrong framing can deprive mindfulness meditation of its liberatory potentials and ethical foundations brought up by several of the interviewed teachers, is its use in the military:

I've even heard that it's taught in in the American army. And I'm sure they would feel that they shouldn't do that if it brings ethical questions with it, if the outcome of this practice is that the soldiers start to ask themselves questions about what they're doing, then they wouldn't use it there. That's my feeling. (Stefan)

As such, the military is an emblematic example, also frequently drawn upon by critical scholars (Purser, 2019a), of an institutional setting that runs counter to notions like interconnectedness, kindness, forgiveness etc., which by the teachers are understood as key ethical precepts to be embedded in the practice of mindfulness meditation:

I remember I was on a six week [silent] meditation retreat and did the dishes with this woman every day. And we never spoke to each other, of course, but we bonded. And I felt, you know, for a while I felt like she was like my sister. And then it turned out she was a captain in the army. And her goal is to teach meditation to people in the army. Oh no! How can you do that? [laughs]. (Annie)

To these teachers, then, the use of the practice in the military is an example of a ‘wrong’ intention. As such, they subscribe to a view in which mindfulness meditation is understood as a largely politically neutral practice, neither inherently benevolent or malevolent, and which can therefore be framed with a variety of intentions: “Not many things are either purely good or purely bad. A lot depends on what you put into it”. (Paul). In this view, mindfulness meditation can function as an anaesthetizing ideological supplement to late capitalism when framed in terms of individual self-improvement and productivity, but they also contend that framings in line with traditional ethical precepts such as interconnectedness and kindness can function as an antidote to co-optation and pave the way for social change:

For me, there's the mindfulness practice, but also understanding the practice in the context of the more traditional, like, Buddhist teachings. (...) Because initially, it was like 'Oh this practice is really helping me focus more'. (...) So it was a very like personal practice. Which I don't think there is anything wrong with. Like going to the gym is a personal practice too, but I don't think a lot of people would be criticizing people for going to the gym. (...). But I think it's really understanding it in the context of the traditional teachings that allowed me to see how mindfulness practice can really influence how we view and engage with social change work. (Reiji)

Relatedly, some teachers made it a point to highlight the explicitly anti-capitalist orientation of their practice:

I'm anti-capitalist in the sense of the profit-motive and consumerism and greed, which I see as being detrimental to the well-being of people. And so I have never been interested in supporting a structure that I think is inherently based on a confusion of where well-being lies. And so I just want to make that explicit (...) that when I dedicate my [mindfulness meditation] practice and teaching to freedom and awakening, I'm including the cultural and structural processes in that. (Marian)

For these teachers, then, particular framings of mindfulness meditation, as in the quotes above, can potentially galvanize it from co-optation. To be sure, such framings are easier to articulate in some institutional contexts than others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the majority of teachers who subscribe to this view, are primarily engaged in activism. However, many activists also think of mindfulness meditation in more embodied terms, which we will explore below.

### *A Trojan Horse*

So a belief causing a lot of our problems today is greed. And this is based on the idea that happiness is linked with owning things, or achieving stuff. And in almost any kind of meditation, you can find that place where there is a beautiful satisfaction, not born from owning something or succeeding in anything. Where it is clear, that this peace is not here because I succeeded in my job. It's a contentment that exists in itself. And that gives you a sense of security that makes you kind of less anxious and less aggressive and less in competition and less depending on your ego, you know (...). (Moselle)

As opposed to the teachers in the previous section who emphasized how co-optation is largely a question of the framing or intention of the practice, others insist that there is an inherent emancipatory potential in mindfulness meditation itself – regardless of the discursive framings and institutional settings around it. In various ways, these teachers point to how mindfulness meditation provides access

to a pre-conceptual register of knowing or an “aliveness beyond ideas” (Leya) as one teacher put it, which exists independently of thoughts, discourses and institutions. Mindfulness meditation, in this view, allows people to:

(...) realize that we can live less reliant on thinking to guide us, and more reliant on other kinds of intelligence. And that takes time because culturally we have really agreed that thinking is the smartest thing - even though we see that thinking doesn't always seem to go very well. (Ulrika)

In this view, mindfulness meditation is understood as harboring an inherent transformative potential and capacity for transcending dominant notions of selfhood. In different ways, the teachers point to how this potential involves a certain loosening of attachments to conceptual ideas as well as a sense of interconnectedness and blurring of the boundaries between self and other. Here explained through a jellyfish-metaphor, that points to a certain decentering of the common-sense experience of subjectivity.

So people gradually [when meditating] start to experience that what a human being is, has that little part that feels like ‘me’ and feels separate and feels ‘not enough’ and gravitates to focusing on problems ‘that I've got to fix’. Usually that's most people's mode. And there's no end to it. But we can't notice that, because we're in such a hurry to catch up, kind of thing... So one of my favorite images for what we are, is that this little sense of ‘me’ is like being in a little slap-together wooden shack on top of a giant jellyfish. And we think that we're up here and we think that we're guiding the jellyfish. We think we've got the reins and we're steering. And meanwhile, the jellyfish is like on all these forces that are at play.. So it's going along on other currents and we keep feeling responsible or we take credit or we feel we're at fault for things that we're part of, but we're not really in control of. (...) And also the jellyfish metaphor I like, because when we get out of the front brain cells, we could say, and more into our body experience (...) we start to experience how even our experience of our body starts to be that it's actually bigger than what we look like. There starts to be sensations that are not inside the skin, like a feeling of spaciousness or (...) And so the jellyfish as part of what we are, also in the different layers of mind, like the unconscious mind, where there's a lot that's shared.. Then we have the tentacles, the limbs.. Kind of trailing out and probably in touch with other jellyfish, or the jellyfish might be all of us, you know. And we've all got our little shack riding somewhere on the jellyfish the same way that trees have their underground fungal networks to communicate. (Leya)

Viewing the human subject as comprised, in this way, of several layers of (corporeal, entangled, unconscious...) being, that operate below the discursive ‘me’ in the wooden shack, changes the understanding of mindfulness meditation. As such, the discursive and intuitional framings around it become less pertinent and its introduction to corporate environments is consequently seen as less problematic. For these teachers, then, certain discursive and institutional framings may well blunt the effectiveness of what is seen as an inherently emancipatory practice, but liberation can still be reached ‘in a roundabout way’, as the practice works in the more sub-terranean layers of being:

I think on the one hand (...) there is a danger in practicing mindfulness without the ethical teachings and I think that may not necessarily be a direct path to freedom and liberation. And at the same time, I believe that if you are practicing any sort of mindfulness practice... Even if you're doing it without the ethical teachings (...) I still feel like at the end of the day it can't hurt. (...) It may take you away from the true path to liberation, and it may be in a roundabout way, but if you keep at it, I think the process of introspection and silent reflection will ultimately get everyone there if they just stick with that path and with that practice. Because to me, (...) like

human beings, somewhere in our DNA, we all know in our bodies what it means to be free. (...)  
(Reiji)

While some teachers emphasize how discursive and institutional framings may blunt the effectiveness of the practice, others view its transformative potential as more independent of them:

Well, I tend to view [the introduction of mindfulness to corporate settings] as it's all good. (...). And then, of course, you can critique lots of different things about it. I think it's helpful if the critique comes from the ground that it's all good and it's good that people are learning to meditate. It's good that people are, you know, learning to recognize some of their own patterns. It's good they're generating a certain patience or kindness or tolerance of themselves, etc.. It's all good. (...) And the reason I emphasize that is because I think sometimes that can be an unhelpful kind of criticism (...) that suggests, like (...) oh, this secular mindfulness, it's all narcissistic or it's all about making employees more productive, etc., because it's not all about that. Maybe the person in the company that hires the person to teach their team, maybe they're hoping for, you know, more productivity, less stress, less sick days, etc. OK. But when somebody is actually taught a practice of mindfulness, they're not engaging with 'let me have less sick days'. They're engaging with meeting their own hearts and minds and experience and habits. So that's good. That's good. (Jan)

The co-optation critique, again, is no longer revelatory, but somewhat 'unhelpful'. In fact, some teachers even seem to suggest mechanisms of co-optation that run the opposite way – in which the transformation happens under the guise of business as usual, where mindfulness practitioners work as “Secret Agents” (Leya), as one teacher put it. In addition to being under the radar, this transformation is often described as a slow and subtle dynamic, which may be difficult to detect with the naked eye:

I think that sometimes because of the immediacy of how we live, everything is coming at us so quickly, right. 'I want to make a change, I want it to be different.' But there are these subtle changes that happen... You find yourself just little by little with your children being a little different; little different. With your colleagues; a little different. With your thoughts; a little different. These are subtle changes, but are they as impactful as a huge transformation? I think so. (Nandi)

These changes are often described by the teachers as spreading through the social fabric “like a drop of tonic in polluted water” (Karen). As such, this view sees mindfulness meditation less as a discursive phenomenon and more as a practice operating on non-discursive and pre-cognitive registers, which can be affected independently of the discursive framing or stated intention of the practice. This leads to envisioning the progressive potential of mindfulness meditation as a series of slow, subtle changes, which may even happen under the guise of efficiency and productivity.

### *An overblown promise*

Finally, some teachers view the issue of co-optation and the (lack) of transformative potentials in mindfulness meditation as being somewhat exaggerated. As such, they subscribe neither to the co-optation critique nor to the above outlined responses to this critique. Instead, they are skeptical of the relative significance that mindfulness meditation is assigned within all these stances; as something that potentially has the power to affect social change or reinforce the status quo:

It's a foolish, really, to kind of invest in a way, in a single package called mindfulness, as though somehow inherent within it is going to transform life on Earth. 'It's going to be a great new renaissance through mindfulness'. This is projections that go way over the top, way over the top. (Mark)

As such, the whole idea that, on a societal level, mindfulness meditation harbors emancipatory and transformative potentials (which may or may not be co-opted, and/or can be fulfilled through the right intention) is assuming too much, according to these teachers. In their view, the practice is not necessarily that impactful. It may, of course, be a piece of the puzzle in concomitance with a host of other initiatives: “whatever it does, that’s good, but there are other ways to be more open and resilient and so on” (John), but in itself, the discussion about co-optation and transformative potentials of mindfulness meditation “puts too much strain on something most people, realistically speaking, will not do for more than 20-30 minutes a day” (Jessica). This also implies, that the original co-optation critique is seen as misplaced. Particularly, as noted by several teachers, given the origin of the critique in universities and business schools, who arguably have more impact on society than mindfulness teachers:

These kinds of critiques don’t come up when people teach relaxation techniques, they don’t come up when we teach people how to use software more effectively, you know. (...) All of a sudden it is up to the mindfulness teachers to save society, and I think there is a role to play there, but I also think it can be a little bit overblown. Especially when these critiques come from, in some cases, no offence, business school teachers. (...) And I’m wondering where is the critique of business school education? (...) How are we teaching our business leaders? That is probably the single most important place we should be focusing right now. Instead we have people going out into organizations, 8 steps down the stream and saying ‘why aren’t you changing the system?’. (Mathew)

The question of co-optation thus becomes less relevant here, as there is not necessarily something significant to either co-opt or save from co-optation. Instead, this view, more or less explicitly, directs the critical-reflexive gaze back on the co-optation analyst and raises questions about the (critical) performativity of research. In the next section, I address these questions while engaging in a broader conceptual discussion of how the findings presented in this section can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of co-optation and mindfulness meditation.

### **Conceptualizing different co-optations**

The following section introduces the terms ‘intellectual’, ‘inverse’ and ‘empty’ co-optation as conceptual categories that can help expand on the three responses outlined above and thus contribute to widening our vocabulary around the concept of co-optation, the organizational practice of mindfulness meditation and the intersections between them.

#### *Intellectual co-optation*

The first response to the risk of co-optation, outlined above, in which mindfulness meditation can serve the purposes of whatever framing or intent it is accompanied by, ranging from efficient warfare to anti-capitalist social change work, represents the practice as a universally co-optable empty signifier – a politically neutral technique that may be applied in the service of good, evil and everything in between. As such the teachers’ response to the risk of co-optation essentially becomes a question of

being co-opted by the right cause. Compared to the dominant conception of structural co-optation, then, this view differs by suggesting that co-optation is not a one-way street, in which the larger power-structure invariably ‘swallows up’ oppositional or emancipatory ideas and renders them impotent. Instead, co-optation is seen here as a process which may serve both power and its subversion. Keshnur (1993:10) suggests the term “*intellectual co-optation*” for this process, which allows for the possibility of oppositional forces to co-opt the weapons of the dominant culture and vice versa. As such, this process of co-optation is, at least in principle, independent of pre-existing structures of power, as opposed to the dominant notion of ‘structural co-optation’, which tends to be unidirectional and thus depends upon the existence of a dominant culture that absorbs and neutralizes dissent. Keshnur (1993:19) notes how so-called *intellectual co-optation*:

(...) can function in the absence of preexistent structures of cultural domination by dint of the fact that the cultural item is not simply being blunted but retains its edge while changing its legitimating function as it passes from the hands of one group to those of its enemies.

Mindfulness meditation, then, is not necessarily blunted into a supine McMindfulness (Purser, 2019a) as proponents of structural co-optation would argue, but may instead retain its transformative potential, whether in the service of Wall Street or Occupy Wall Street (du Plessis and Just, 2022). As a result of these multidirectional properties, intellectual co-optation, for Keshnur, “is not an inevitable structural feature of society but a victory that emerges from the smoke of a dubious battle” (Keshnur, 1993: 19). The mindfulness teachers accordingly engage in this ‘dubious battle’ when seeking to embed the practice in ethical teachings or specific intentions. As mentioned, this battle is arguably less dubious in the context of activist movements, which are often quite receptive to intentions such as kindness and non-striving, whereas mainstream organizations, often committed to institutional logics of productivity and profitability, tend to make such framings more difficult. Nonetheless, mindfulness meditation, even in corporate settings, should in this view not be ruled out as always already co-opted by these logics. In this perspective, the assumption “that an assemblage is inherently capitalist and thus powerful” (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020: 18) is resisted in favor of empirical curiosity with regard to the result of the ‘dubious battle’ of intellectual co-optation. As such, power, in this perspective, is not a “pre-distributed stock permanently held in place by one agent, but is fluid” (ibid: 17). Thus, the concept of intellectual co-optation avoids the essentialist arguments of inevitability and unidirectionality of change, that are implicit in the idea of structural co-optation; Mindfulness meditation may well be co-opted in the service of profit and efficiency, but it may also be successfully framed in the service of kindness or anti-capitalism. In practice, however, things will likely be somewhat more murky and ambiguous. In that sense, the concept of intellectual co-optation ought not invoke rigid dichotomies such as ‘co-optation/non-co-optation’ or ‘co-opted by X/Y’. Instead it might be helpful to imagine a continuum with a wide variety of outcomes in the form of partial (non)co-optations (du Plessis, 2018: 569-71).

While the majority of critical studies of mindfulness meditation tend to rely on the idea of structural co-optation, some are open to the possibility of multi-directionality. While emphasizing the prevalence of neoliberal instrumentalization and co-optation of mindfulness meditation by an “intractable organizational world” Islam et al. (2022: 22) thus also note how “critical and complicit tendencies likely mingle (...) opening windows for re-signification” (ibid.). As such intellectual co-optation in the form

of different discursive framings, resulting from the dubious battle of “hegemonic contests” (ibid: 19) is acknowledged as a possibility. Schmid and Aiken (2020: 5) accordingly understand “transformative mindfulness” as integrating “mind-body practices with a political agenda, that challenges current societal trajectories of injustice and unsustainability” (ibid: 5). Similarly, Rowe (2016: 7) emphasizes how the transformative potential of mindfulness meditation hinges on it being “embedded in macro-movements that explicitly orient themselves against dominative systems”. For Rowe, it follows from this that the idea of a Trojan Horse must be rejected because it “assumes that dominative institutions and systems can be transformed without being explicitly targeted” (ibid.). The following section unpacks the latter assumption, which is labelled *inverse co-optation*, and explores its relationship to intellectual co-optation.

### *Inverse co-optation*

The second response to the risk of co-optation given by the teachers, namely the idea of mindfulness meditation as a ‘Trojan Horse’, insists that the practice is intrinsically liberating. This runs counter to the first response, discussed above, in which mindfulness meditation is understood as politically neutral, and thus co-optable by heterogeneous framings. While the first response is thus often accompanied by a sharp distinction between instrumentalized and more holistic, or even transformative, framings or ‘teachings’, the transformative potential in the second response is, at least to some degree, independent of discursive framings. As such, the metaphor of the Trojan Horse implies that while mindfulness meditation may appear to be co-opted on the level of framing, this appearance is strategic, as it disguises the fact that transformative potentials of the practice are simultaneously being realized in more subtle registers of being.

This kind of *inverse co-optation* has also been described by Coles (2016: 123) as “co-opting a politics of cooptation”. This is understood as a strategic leveraging of the ways in which certain ideas or practices can be “selectively connected with particular dynamics in neoliberal systems in order to co-opt their powers for the purpose of supporting and intensifying dynamics of radical democracy” (ibid: 122). As an example Coles describes a “delicate trickster game” (ibid: 150) with respect to neoliberal governance, in which one can “play the (neoliberal) game” (ibid.) in order to institute transformative counter practices - for example by achieving funding and institutional support for radical alternatives by hypothesizing that they (also) would have a positive influence on the specified metrics to which funding are pegged. We see how this could also apply to mindfulness meditation, which may be posited to decrease stress and burnout while simultaneously working – with mindfulness practitioners as ‘Secret Agents’ - as a subtle counter-practice to the neoliberal ethos. Such an explanation may help account for findings like the study by made by Walach et al. (2007), which suggests that participating in an MBSR course – ostensibly the example *par excellence* of the structural co-optation of mindfulness meditation – in fact makes employees *more*, not less, critical of their work environment.

As such, the figure of the Trojan Horse implies a distinction between levels; on one level mindfulness meditation is co-opted by corporate logics, while this co-optation is inverted on another. In the case of mindfulness meditation, we might accordingly suggest that the first level is institutional or *discursive* and has to do with different articulations and framings of the practice, while the other is *non-discursive*, pre-cognitive and corporeal. The transformative potential of mindfulness meditation is thus located in



registers of being, which are not tied to ‘the political’ in the traditional sense, but, in the words of Jane Bennett, are “vague, below the radar – but not nothing” (Duke, 2020). Here Bennett echoes Connolly’s (2002:85), suggestion that many messages flowing between different regions of the brain are “to small and fast to be identified by consciousness but are, nonetheless, amenable to some degree to cultural inscription, experimental research, and technical intervention.” This ‘technical intervention’, into the pre-conscious visceral register - or the jellyfish below the wooden shack – may thus potentially be carried out through mindfulness meditation. The transformative potential of the practice would consequently consist in influencing the “cloud of protosensations” and “affective tone” that operate “way, way in the background of awareness” (Bennett, 2020: 22) below the threshold of visibility and experience. Bennett (2020: 61) stresses how “it is important not to relinquish [the] atmospheric realm to the capitalists” and suggests “new modes of resistance targeted at the affective register of capitalist-induced anxiety” (Bennett, 2020: 63) as necessary supplements to the tried-and-true oppositional strategies of the Left such as unionization, strikes and revolutionary fervor (ibid.). The micropolitics of mindful awareness, then, in this reading, continuously invade and pervade organizational micropolitics. This happens through the “slow, subtle, indirect, persistent and often more poetic than polemical” (Bennett, 2020: 71) inducement of a kinder, wiser, and more embodied disposition, that works as an antidote to the instrumentalized, competitive sphere of corporate life. What is a stake, then, is akin to a “politics of the subject” (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 127) understood as:

a process of producing something beyond discursively enabled shifts in identity, something that takes into account the sensational and gravitational experience of embodiment, something that recognizes the motor and neural interface between self and world as the site of becoming of both.

While this kind of subject-politics is at most nascent in existing research on mindfulness meditation in organizations, some studies (eg. Zaidman, 2020) emphasize the efficacy of the practice in non-discursive registers. Schmid and Aiken (2020: 13), forexample, suggest that mindfulness meditation can challenge the separateness of the practitioners’ self and open towards the “formless spatiality of *interbeing* which transcends the duality of self and world”. Ultimately however, these studies tend to subscribe to the idea of intellectual co-optation outlined in the previous section.

### *Empty co-optation*

Finally, the third response outlined by the teachers to the risk of co-optation, is the idea that there is nothing all that significant to co-opt. As such, this objection implies that critical scholars and mindfulness teachers alike tend to overemphasize the transformative potentials of what, across the diversity approaches, is essentially a rather mundane practice – namely sitting down and paying attention for 20 minutes a day. In the case of critical research, this might imply that the seductive allure of the concept of co-optation could potentially lead scholars to assume an object of co-optation where there is none. Perhaps this in turn can be partly explained by the fact that some mindfulness practitioners, in this reading, exaggerate the revolutionary powers of their teachings. Furthermore, in a critique of the vital materialism of Bennett and Connolly, invoked above for theorizing the Trojan Horse of inverse co-optation, Johnston (2013: 156) notes how the premise that “even the slightest banal experiences introduce modifications into the delicate calibrations of shifting brain-body-milieu systems” potentially leads to a plethora of questionable rationalizations. For example, who is to say whether bingeing the latest hit show on Netflix is not potentially a politically transformative gesture? As

such, theorizations of inverse co-optation encounter the same problem as theorizations of co-optation, namely that there, in this reading, is nothing significant to (inversely) co-opt.

The objection of mindfulness teachers to what they perceive as the overblown transformative potentials of mindfulness meditation might then, as suggested by one informant, direct the analytic focus back toward the ‘business school teacher’ himself and by extension to the critical performativity (Cabantous et al., 2016) of mindfulness research more generally. Gibson-Graham (1996) have accordingly stressed how the continuously reiterated descriptions of capitalism as an omnipotent and omnipresent force in the shaping of subjects and society risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy though the power of language to create the effects that it names. Conversely, then, highlighting alternatives (see also Parker et al., 2008) might help sow cracks in this ‘capitalocentric’ world(view). The idea of an *overblown promise* and concomitant *empty co-optation*, however marks a certain indifference to this debate. Instead of emphasizing transformative potentials in the direction of either reinforcing or subverting capitalism, it suggests a kind of ‘realism’ in which the societal impact of mindfulness meditation is negligible. Of course, in stating that mindfulness meditation does not have significant transformative potentials, one also implies that the practice underpins the status quo - at least in so far that it does not (seek to) alter it.

### **Concluding discussion**

The above findings and conceptual discussion can be summed up in the table below. Dividing responses to the risk of co-optation into assumptions of either *Status quo* or *Transformation* on the one hand, and whether they afford primacy to the *discursive* or *non-discursive* level on the other, we end up with four distinct ideal-types (see table 1):

.....**Insert table 1 about here**.....

*Structural co-optation*, the dominant analytical figure in critical studies of mindfulness meditation, can then be understood as the assumption that the practice - in spite of its liberatory potentials - is swallowed up by the pervasive omnivorous neoliberal discourse of efficiency and self-improvement, thus reinforcing the status quo.

*Intellectual co-optation*, on the other hand, conceives mindfulness meditation as a politically neutral technique that can facilitate transformation in many directions, and which may therefore be co-opted by any number of discourses. As such co-optation is potentially multi-directional, and when connected with the intentions and framings of e.g. social movements that seek societal transformation and subversion of power, the practice reinforces these ambitions.

*Empty co-optation* can be seen as a non-discursive approach in the sense that its key variable, namely the insignificant transformative potentials of mindfulness meditation, is independent of discursive framings. Both over-zealous mindfulness teachers and critical scholars thus misunderstand this non-discursive essence of the practice. As such, there is no transformative potential to be co-opted – regardless of who seeks to co-opt it.

*Inverse co-optation*, is another non-discursive approach, in which the key variable - the inherent transformative potential of the practice – is what is being overlooked by discursive approaches applied by managers, critical academics and the like. While co-optation may thus be happening at the level of discourse, construing the practice as an efficiency-enhancing coping-mechanism, mindfulness meditation may still work as a transformative Trojan Horse in the non-discursive registers of being.

These four ideal-types should not be seen as immutable or exhaustive categories. Rather their purpose is to contextualize and provide alternatives to the dominant conception of mindfulness meditation in organizations. As such, they can be viewed as invitations to take inspiration from the mindfulness teachers and engage with the ‘mystery’ of how mindfulness meditation actually works (or doesn’t) in and through human minds and organizations. In contrast to fields like the neurosciences, where it is, at least occasionally, acknowledged how little we know about such matters (e.g. Fox, 2015) the level of certainty with which scholars identify ‘co-optation’ can at times seem rather premature. Particularly when this identification is rooted in analyses that employ discursive or institutional frameworks to study a practice that is fundamentally about loosening the grip of language and access pre-cognitive and corporeal registers.

#### *Implications, limitations and future research*

As opposed to relying on dichotomous, yet seductive, categories, the theoretical implications of this study can be summed up as a general invitation to pursue more nuanced conceptualizations of co-optation. As such, the hope is to stimulate inquiries into whether a given analytical framework allows for other outcomes than the classical account of structural co-optation (Kenshur, 1993) in the tradition of Selznick (1948) and Marcuse (1969), and if so, what these outcomes might be. The above typology of ideal-types is thus by no means exclusive, as one could likely imagine both other modes of co-optation, as well as various hybrids, emerging from heterogeneous situational conditions of possibility.

While, or indeed *because*, structural co-optation is both a valuable theoretical perspective and undoubtable empirical phenomenon, the aim of this study is to cultivate a certain mindful awareness of the risk of analytical ‘paranoia’ (Sedgwick, 2003) in this regard. Instead of taking for granted the sweeping defeatism of inevitable structural co-optation, then, we might do well to also direct our attention towards the embodied phenomenological subtleties of human subjects, their entanglements with organization, and the concomitant implications for heterogeneous engagements with the organizational world between power and its subversion. This applies not only to mindfulness meditation, but also other areas, such as resistance (eg. Contu, 2008; du Plessis, 2018), alternative organizing (Ul-haq et al., 2022, Dahlman et al., 2022) and sustainable development (eg. Burchell and Cook, 2013), where the figure of structural co-optation tends to lend itself as an obvious explanatory tool. The same is likely to be the case with contemporary developments around phenomena such as psychedelics and nature, which have traditionally been understood as distinctly external respites from the organization, but are now increasingly brought into its domain of interest through practices like ‘forest bathing’<sup>8</sup> or micro-dosing (Andersson and Kjellgren, 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: <https://hr.harvard.edu/event/saturday-forest-bathing>

In more practical terms, the study can hopefully assist mindfulness teachers and -students in contemplating what it might mean to navigate the risk of co-optation. As such, the study can be read as an overview, or map, of the different approaches to this question that are currently circulating in the practitioner community. In addition to helping practitioners chart a course through this treacherous terrain, the study may thus also inspire the development of new and hitherto unknown routes through it. Furthermore, managers implementing mindfulness programs in their organization might use this paper as an invitation to practice reflexive leadership (Alvesson, Blom and Svenningsson, 2016) in relation to the (stated) purpose of such programs, and perhaps also to experiment with framing their mindfulness course differently, and emphasizing values such as kindness, wisdom and peace as opposed to efficiency, reduced sick days and coping with stress (see eg. Van Gordon and Shonin, 2020). Alternatively, and perhaps more radically, they might even refrain from attaching any kind of instrumentality or specific justification to the course, and just observe what happens when one allows this sort of empty space, or ‘nothing’ (Boon, Cazdyn and Morton, 2015), to inhabit the organization. For organizational scholars, the study poses a practical question around the performativity of critical research and highlights how dialogue between academia and practitioners can help stimulate academic debate and challenge extant theories and assumptions. Thus, as pointed out by one of the informants in this study, there is something curious about the fact that it is business school teachers (whose average work-day typically involves educating future business leaders) that have been most concerned with the alleged supineness of mindfulness courses, which are generally managed several steps down the corporate hierarchy. Relatedly, Parker (2023) has recently argued that the potential transformative impact of writing scarcely read ‘critical’ papers is rather negligible – particularly compared to the strategic interventions that could be made with regard to teaching at business schools. Instead of producing more dramatic and eloquent analyses aimed at awakening the masses (or mindfulness teachers) out of their ideological slumber (Spicer et al., 2009: 542), then, we would do well to consider the possibility that they might already be awake, and that we – the critical scholars – are the ones who have fallen asleep in our endless repetition of the same “paternalistic jeremiads” (Morton, 2015: 223).

Finally, as this study is primarily aimed toward theory development with regard to different modes of co-optation, some limitations concerning the breadth of its conclusions follow. Many are related to the sample of informants, which is arguably too small and limited to draw any generalizable conclusions about the effects of mindfulness programs in organizations, the likelihood of different co-optation types in different settings etc. Furthermore, comparisons between different organizational and geographical contexts are made difficult both by the overlapping nature of these categories (see appendix 1) and the sample size. Moreover, while interviewing mindfulness teachers is useful for theorizing around abstract (and non-conceptual) concepts, it excludes the possibility of exploring how mindfulness programs are experienced by the people being taught. While several such studies have already been carried out (eg. Islam et al., 2022; Karjalainen et al., 2021), a task for future studies of this kind could be to explore different types of co-optation from the perspective of mindfulness students, and see how they compare to the teacher-accounts presented in this paper. Additionally, while the occurrence of structural and intellectual co-optation can be shown and documented in the discursive register, the non-discursive nature of empty, and in particular inverse, co-optation make them into somewhat more speculative categories. However, sociological theorizing about non-conceptual mind-states and concomitant co-optation dynamics in non-discursive registers, may perhaps, in the not-too-

distant future, be complemented by insights from neuroimaging studies (see eg. Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013; Tang, Hölzel and Posner, 2015). Until then, the tentative typology presented in this paper can hopefully be of use in broadening our vocabulary around the possible co-optation(s) of mindfulness meditation.

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