



Nonattachment and Intergroup Harmony

Modern psychological interventions are increasingly employing constructs and practices from contemplative traditions to reduce suffering and promote prosocial behavior. However, without good measures of the constructs, it is difficult to assess whether the interventions work as intended and how the constructs relate to positive functioning in the general population.

Dr Baljinder Sahdra, from the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education (IPPE) at ACU, has developed and validated a measure of nonattachment, a relatively new construct in the mindfulness literature. Nonattachment is defined as a flexible and balanced way of relating to one's experiences without clinging to or suppressing them. This project includes further validation studies of this construct to examine its role in promoting prosocial behaviour in adolescents and adults.

To help others means to give up self-enhancement for the moment and support other people's power, achievement, and personal success. The nonattached person is expected to let go of self-enhancement feelings and thoughts ('When pleasant experiences end, I am fine moving on to what comes next', as an example item from the measure of nonattachment). Also, the nonattached person is expected to take joy in others' successes ('I can take joy in others' achievements without feeling envious', as another scale item).

In contrast, the attached person is expected to cling to personal joys that conflict with others' needs, and to avoid negative feelings, such as those that might arise from seeing others in distress or doing something socially risky to help another. If nonattachment entails a flexible use of executive control resources to attend to others' needs, it should be positively linked to empathy. However, nonattachment is not the same as empathy. Theoretically, nonattachment focuses on the willingness to let go of personal joys that conflict with others, whereas empathy focuses on the ability to see things from another's viewpoint.

As expected, Dr Sahdra has found that nonattachment is positively related to empathy and generosity in adults. In another study on adolescents, nonattachment was positively related to empathy. Further, adolescents high in nonattachment were more likely to be nominated by their peers as kind and helpful, even after controlling for empathy and self-esteem.

The results from this project suggest that socio-emotional learning interventions harnessing the power of nonattachment may produce personal and interpersonal benefits for young people and adults.



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