

Extended Abstract for the Degrowth Conference 2014:

Education for Sustainable Consumption through  
Mindfulness Training

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### 1) Background and aims

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered one of the main drivers of sustainability strategies worldwide (United Nations 1992; Rieß 2006). The UNESCO names ESD as “the most effective means that society possesses for confronting the challenges of the future“(UNESCO 2002, 7). ESD encompasses more than cognitive based learning about Sustainable Development (BMBF 2009). The acquirement of specific competences is focused upon, learners of all ages shall be enabled to shape and create their life’s actively in a self-directed, sustainable way (BMBF 2009). The eight competencies are combined into the meta competence “Gestaltungskompetenz” (shaping competency) (Transfer 21 2007; BMBF 2009). One condition for the success of ESD, according to the German government, is the application of “Gestaltungskompetenz” to thematic areas that are crucial for the advancement of Sustainable Development (BMBF 2009). Consumption, including non-consumption or sufficiency (accordingly: Education for Sustainable Consumption (ESC)) is one of those areas (Barth and Fischer 2012) and shall be focused upon in this paper.

The present consumption levels of a majority of population in industrialized countries are characterized by ever growing levels of consumption and the resulting damage caused to the environment as well as the depletion of resources. Sustainable consumption, on the other hand, satisfies the needs of today’s population, but without endangering the basis of development of generations to come through increasing hyper consumption (Hansen and Schrader 2001). In order to establish sustainable

consumption levels, every individual needs to adapt their consumption behavior, especially in the mature economies. A large willingness to adapt and even 'de-grow' consumption levels is documented in many empirical studies (e.g. European Commission 2011). However, in the daily routine, the implementation often fails due to a deficit in supply and information as well as habitualized consumption patterns (e.g. Tully and Krok 2009). Furthermore, striving for continuous increase of material wealth is deeply embedded in most cultural systems of evaluating a good life, shedding a negative light on sufficiency. The discrepancy between theoretical willingness and actual behavior, the so called attitude-behavior-gap, is well known and analyzed at length in sustainable consumption research (see Auger and Devinney 2007; Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010, amongst others). One of the dimensions of "Gestaltungskompetenz" is especially relevant for this situation: The competency to reflect one's own guiding principles and values, as well as those of the society and culture surrounding us. This competency is considered the starting point for the recognition of one's own actions on society and the environment (Transfer 21 2007) and hence the starting point for any lasting personal and cultural change process. The education of reflection competency in the context of ESC could thus theoretically decrease the attitude-behavior-gap. When considering the broader content though, it seems that the temporarily realization or reflection of otherwise subconscious behavior patterns is not sufficient to transform long-established routines. Building upon controlled experiments in behavioral studies of Langer (1992), the attitude-behavior-gap phenomena could be explained through the following assumption: Subconscious behavioral patterns are indeed brought into consciousness for a limited amount of time through self-reflection. An example situation would be the moment an individual fills out a consumption related questionnaire. In the actual buying situation however, this consciousness is no longer accessible. The individual remains 'mindless', as Langer calls it, in contrast to acting mindful and aligned with their values and belief systems. The concept of mindfulness encompasses the concept of self-reflection in each given moment. It accordingly goes much further than the definition of self-reflection, as it describes an enduring increase of consciousness of our own behavior in every moment (Langer 1989; Klatt, Buckworth, and Malarkey 2009; Bahl et al. 2013).

Langer (1989) was one of the first to describe Mindfulness and Mindlessness as concepts in the clinical- and behavioral psychology. The principal of being present in the present moment however, is much older and originates in religious Buddhist traditions. Especially in the „Vipassana“-tradition<sup>1</sup>, the cultivation of consciousness for the present moment as well as neutral, non-reactive awareness for events inside one’s self and in the outer world has been and still is trained (Kabat-Zinn 1991, c1990). In clinical research, secular forms of mindfulness training have been applied successfully for a long time (see Kabat-Zinn et al. 1992; Bowen et al. 2006 for more information). Apart from the clinical setting, the concept of mindfulness is gaining more momentum, too. A relationship between mindfulness training and individual well-being has been shown (Carmody and Baer 2008; Chiesa and Serretti 2009) and relating to the moderation of the attitude-behavior-gap, first results have been established as well. In a study by Chatzisirantis and Hagger (2007), the level of mindfulness influenced the relationship between intention and going-through with health related activities, such as exercising. Brown and colleagues (2003; 2005) show a tendency for decreased consumption levels in general with a growing level of mindfulness. In the 2003 study, the authors also found a higher degree of perceived self-regulation of behavior from participants with a higher level of mindfulness. Those findings back up Langer’s assumptions about a permanent rise in conscious awareness through mindfulness (1992) and might also prove relevant for the area of shopping addictions, such as self-discrepancy related impulse shopping or overconsumption (Dittmar and Drury 2000). Other researchers call mindfulness competency the “antidote to consumerism” (Rosenberg 2004, 107), empowering consumers to choose to consume – or not to consume at all – in line with their values instead of driven by subconscious routines or cultural expectations. A link between a measurable increase in pro-social behavior through mindfulness training as well as an increased capacity for empathy and compassion has also been shown (Singer and Bolz 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Vipassana“ is one of two main meditation techniques in Buddhism and can be translated as „Insight“, the practice of a clear awareness/consciousness for the incidents of the present moment. In a traditional sense, Vipassana meditation is supposed to clear the mind of negative and „impure“ thoughts. The second area of meditation “Samatha” means the practice of inner calm- or stillness (Gunaratana 2011).

None of the presented studies empirically analyze the relationship between mindfulness competency and sustainable (non-) consumption behavior with focus on the influence of mindfulness training.

## **2) Research goals and setting**

In the research project at hand, an interdisciplinary and theory driven research model will be developed and empirically tested to fill this research gap and achieve the following aims: (I) Conceptualization of the relationship between mindfulness competency and sustainable consumption behavior (II) development of a mindfulness training that increases sustainable consumption patterns (III) empirical validation of the relationship between mindfulness competency and sustainable consumption behavior as well as the effect of mindfulness training on the consumption behavior with special focus on the attitude-behavior gap (IV) development of recommendations for action to strengthen ESC and inform post-growth research.

As ESC is a topic relevant for the whole of society, mindfulness trainings will be conducted with three different sample groups. Pupils and students, as the „custodians of the future“ (United Nations 2012, 43) and employees, as despite being named an important target group for ESD, they have not been sufficiently considered by theory or praxis yet (Molzberger and Rohs 2009).

A mix of (I) a quantitative Pre-/Post survey and (II) a multi-part qualitative analysis will be applied. (A) Alongside the documentation of mindfulness competence levels more general consumption behavior as well as specific sustainable consumption patterns will be considered. To be able to analyze the social sustainability for the participants, stress levels and subjective well-being will be inquired. (B) One part of the mindfulness trainings will be the individual documentation of experiences in a special journal. Those will be anonymously analyzed, alongside interviews with participants throughout the trainings and afterwards.

The first paper of the project, which this abstract is referring to, will concentrate on the part I and II, as well as presenting first results from part III.

### 3) Conclusion

Within this paper, the importance of ESC will shortly be introduced. The main part of the paper will focus on the development of a conceptual model to describe the relationship between mindfulness competency and sustainable (non-) consumption behavior with special focus on the attitude-behavior-gap. The advancement of current mindfulness training concepts to incorporate sustainable (non-) consumption aspects will be presented, too, alongside first results of interventions in a school setting in Berlin. The possible impact of the study onto the practical organization of ESC and the embedded transformation potential of mindfulness will conclude the paper.

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