

Personality traits as predictors of mindfulness in FISM World Champions of Magic

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ABSTRACT

Aim

The study aimed to check how the Big Five personality traits relate to mindfulness levels in FISM World Champions of Magic.

Method

The participants were champions of magic ($N = 50$) from 20 countries. International Personality Item Pool Big Five Markers 50 (IPIP-BFM-50) and the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) were used to measure personality traits and mindfulness, respectively.

Results

The regression analysis revealed that emotional stability and conscientiousness explained 47% of mindfulness in champion magicians.

Conclusion

Only two personality traits predicted mindfulness in magicians, which should be interpreted as a preliminary result.

Keywords: personality, mindfulness, art of magic, illusionists.

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INTRODUCTION

Magic as the art of illusion

Magic may be defined as the “theatrical art of creating the illusion of impossibility in an entertaining way” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 27). The profession of an illusionist requires personality predispositions, a proper approach to the audience, as well as knowledge about the psychological mechanisms of the functioning of the human mind (Wiseman, 2011). The magic tricks work as much in the magician’s hands as in the mind of the spectator. Very often, the alternative reality created by the magician appears preferable to the real world, despite that the audience knows that what they experience is an illusion (Reynolds, 2012). As Robert-Houdin (1858) points to, magicians should be very convincing in the art which they perform, magicians are actors playing the roles of magicians. For this reason, the magic performance is called an act. Sometimes, illusionists are perceived by the audience as having supernatural powers (Julia, 2014).

The art of magic is a subject that is more and more often undertaken by researchers in the field of psychology. Much research concerns experimental and cognitive psychology, focusing on the perception of movements used in magic shows (Binet, 1894; Kuhn & Martinez, 2012), the role of Gestalt psychology principles in magical effects (Barnhart, 2010), or the power of suggestion (Wiseman & Greening, 2005). The literature and research suggest that illusionists uniquely manipulate attention and use techniques related to the distraction of attention and social cues (Kuhn & Martinez, 2012; Kuhn, Tatler & Cole, 2009). Ekroll et al. (2021) showed that the illusion of absence during a magic show may resemble psychological processes during car accidents. Napora and Sękowski (2020) compared illusionists with actors in terms of emotional intelligence and social competencies, Denisiuk (2020) compared the quality of life of illusionists and rehabilitators, Huycke (2014) proved that learning and presenting magic tricks lead to an increase in the level of self-esteem. However, there is still little research done on the personality traits of magicians, especially those associated in the unique group of magical artists, i.e., Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques FISM, i.e. society that organizes the World Championships of Magic every three years. However, self-efficacy and optimism predicted self-esteem of illusionists in the study by Napora (2021).

Mindfulness in magic performances

Mindfulness is defined as a specific state of attention, resulting from constantly directing it to what is happening at the moment in a non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zin, 2003). Mindfulness is also understood as a trait, or as a certain target state in which a person has access to significantly expanded attention resources like stimuli, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and reactions (Hagen, 2003). Mindfulness regards the ability of attention to perceive details from the peripheral perceptual field, to record them pre-verbally, and memorize them (Scharmer, 2009). This

psychological construct is also described as a state characterized by being open to new experiences, sensitive to the surroundings, aware of different perspectives of looking at the same thing and oriented towards the present (Siegling & Petrides, 2014). Previous research showed that mindfulness may be a negative predictor of emotion dysregulation (Vujanovic et al., 2010), increase social relations by building closeness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), impact better adaptability at the workplace, and provide a better quality of relations with co-workers (McCormick & Hunter, 2008). The increasing level of mindfulness is related to feeling less stress and anxiety (Kabat-Zin et. al, 1998).

The concept of mindfulness has never been undertaken in the studies on professional magicians. However, there has already been some research on mindfulness in musicians (Czajkowski, Greasley & Allis, 2020; Sousa, Machado, Greten & Coimbra, 2016), singers (Sandage, 2011) and dancers (Serrano & Espírito-Santo, 2017). Farnsworth-Grodd and Cameron (2013) showed a positive relationship between mindfulness, thoughts, and emotions related to performance. Zając-Jamróz (2018) found that mindfulness not only enables more effective communication and helps to reduce the stress related to public speaking, but also facilitates openness to emotional messages.

As Diaz (2013) points to, performing arts and mindfulness may be considered as similar concepts – both of them require focusing on the present moment. By being present here and now, the illusionists modify their behavior to the audience's reaction and reads their body language. Mindfulness is an important factor in art, where an individual is involved in the creation process (Robinson, 2016). According to Mess (2016), mindfulness may enhance magic performance by making the performer more aware, concentrated, responsive to the audience, and happier. Mindfulness allows one to focus on the performance and enables better concentration not only during the performance itself but also before going onstage. "Mindfulness may also come in handy to trigger emotions, memories that give the artist energy or "feeling" of a previous experience that is crucial to their current work" (Robinson, 2016, p. 71). It is essential to include emotions in magic performance (Landman, 2018; Napora & Sękowski, 2020; Ortiz, 1994). Last but not least, mindfulness manifests itself in active reactions to situations that happen during the performance, and these reactions are related to the personality of the performer. The performer becomes fully aware when the presented magic tricks are mastered perfectly and focuses on experiencing "here and now" (Denisiuk, 2017). Burger (2017) emphasizes the role of mindfulness in learning the art of illusion.

Personality traits and mindfulness in professional illusionists

The model of the Big Five (Goldberg, 1981, 1990) is nowadays the best known and the most widely used taxonomy of personality traits, which includes extraversion (or surgency), agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (reverse of neuroticism), and intellect (or openness or imagination). Previous research showed that mindfulness is related to all five major personality factors (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Intellect

According to Chamorro-Premuzic, Furhnam and Reimers (2007, p. 85) “the personality trait that seems most relevant when it comes to predicting higher levels of overall artistic preference is openness to experience, a trait that refers to individual differences in aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, imagination, and innovation striving.” A disposition to be mindful in everyday life correlated positively with openness to experience in previous studies (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Wonder and Minch (2012) suggests that illusionists should perform as much magic as possible, trying new magic effects and performing in new places because openness to new experiences facilitates learning new things and building an artistic workshop.

Emotional stability

Neurotic (i.e., emotionally unstable) people are more prone to negative emotions, which makes it difficult for them to be mindful (Brown & Ryan, 2003). As regards practices of professional conjuring, experiencing negative emotions in live performances limits mindfulness and prevents being present “here and now”, which may have negative impact on the performance.

Conscientiousness

This trait, defined as being well organized, responsible and hardworking (Goldberg, 1992), enables a person to become involved in the process of being present and aware of “here and now”, and this is why conscientiousness correlated positively with mindfulness in previous studies by Latzman & Masuda (2013) and Hanley (2015). Conscientiousness seems essential in practicing magic tricks, being persistent in pursuing goals, and winning championships.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness denotes the attitude towards other people, i.e., a personal orientation which manifests in altruism versus antagonism, and in experienced feelings, thoughts, and actions; an agreeable person is trusting, polite, considerate, and affectionate, as well as willing to cooperate with and help others (Goldberg, 1992). Mindfulness is associated with the development of emotional and social competencies, being calm, altruistic, socially open (Baer, 2003). Agreeableness should be related to mindfulness since both variables have much to do with empathy and compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Some findings advocates this idea (Ortet et al., 2020; Latzman & Masuda, 2013) and other do not (Van den Hurk et al., 2011). The art of magic requires an appropriate approach to the audience, and understanding of emotions evoked by the show (Hoffman, 2015; Ortiz, 1994). Moreover, reaching a high level in the art of illusion requires working with others as it helps to refine the magician’s repertoire. In addition, many FISM World Champions organize seminars for other illusionists.

Surgency

Surgent individuals are active, energetic, outgoing, talkative, daring, and assertive (Strus, Ciecuch & Rowiński, 2014). Extraverted people seem to have a high need for stimulation, in contrast to the mindfulness that characterizes people with a calm temper. This notion suggests negative relationship between surgency and mindfulness. It is worth to note that magicians are more assertive than non-magicians and theatre actors (Napora & Sękowski, 2020). To perform magic, the performer must be open to people, be able to establish contact with the audience, and interact with them (Brown, 2000).

Having considered the rationale summarized above, the current study aimed to establish the relationships between personality traits and mindfulness in World Champions of Magic.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Researchers contacted participants on social media and via e-mail and informed about the purpose and anonymity of the study, about the possibility to withdraw at any moment, and that they would not receive any remuneration for their participation in the study. Fifty (96%male) professional illusionists (age: $M = 43.7$, $SD = 12.3$) gave their consent to take part in the study. They came from twenty countries (see table 1) and were all champions from the FISM (an organization that associates illusionists and organizes the World Championships of Magic every 3 years; Napora, 2021). Although English was not a native language of most of the respondents, their level of English comprehension was sufficient to fill in the English versions of measures described below.

Table 1.

Participants' countries of origin.

Country	Amount	Percent
Australia	1	2
Austria	1	2
Canada	1	2
China	1	2
Finland	2	4
France	4	8
Germany	10	20
Hong Kong	1	2

continuance of the Table 1

Country	Amount	Percent
Italy	1	2
Japan	2	4
Nederland	3	6
Poland	1	2
Romania	1	2
South Korea	1	2
Spain	7	12
Sweden	3	6
Switzerland	2	4
Taiwan	3	6
UK	1	2
USA	4	8
Total	50	100

Measures

Mindfulness

Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS, Brown & Ryan, 2003) consists of 15 items to be assessed on a 5-point Likert response scale. Higher results in questionnaire, then higher level of mindfulness, understood as being aware of present events and experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Cronbach's alpha was .90 in this study. Exemplary items: "I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until some time later", "I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I am doing right now to get there".

Personality traits

International Personality Item Pool Big Five Markers 50 (IPIP-BFM-50, Goldberg, 1992) is a questionnaire that measures five personality factors identified in the lexical tradition. It consists of 50 short sentences addressing behaviors that may be more or less typical for a respondent who has to assess them on a 5-point Likert response scale (exemplary items: "I feel comfortable around people", "I sympathize with others' feelings", "I pay attention to details", "I am relaxed most of the time", "I have a vivid imagination". The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) in this study were: .75 (urgency), .77 (agreeableness), .63 (conscientiousness), .78 (emotional stability) and .74 (intellect).

RESULTS

According to descriptive statistics (see table 2), the sample was characterized by a normal distribution, which enabled the application of parametric statistical tests. According to Pearson's two-tailed correlations, mindfulness correlated with two personality dimensions (table 2). Correlation with conscientiousness was moderate and positive whilst correlation with emotional stability was high and positive. Both these traits were important predictors in a multiple regression model ($F(2, 47) = 22.92; p = .005$), explaining 47% of the variance of mindfulness (standardized B s: .60 for emotional stability and .31 for conscientiousness, both p s < .001).

Table 2

Correlations between mindfulness and personality traits and descriptive statistics.

	Mindfulness	p	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Mindfulness			32.00	88.00	59.80	13.51
Surgency	.20	.170	20.00	47.00	33.42	6.42
Agreeableness	.20	.174	26.00	49.00	37.64	5.90
Conscientiousness	.37**	.009	22.00	50.00	33.06	5.79
Emotional stability	.63**	.000	20.00	46.00	33.76	7.08
Intellect	.13	.383	24.00	50.00	39.98	5.94

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the present study was to establish the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and mindfulness in professional magicians (World Champions of Magic). Only two personality traits, i.e., emotional stability and conscientiousness, turned out to be predictors of mindfulness. Similar results were obtained by Lutzman and Masuda (2013) and Ortet et al. (2020), but in their studies mindfulness correlated with other personality traits as well. It is possible that nonsignificant relationships between mindfulness and surgency, agreeableness, and intellect, may stem from the small sample size and acceptable, but unsatisfactory reliabilities of the IPIP-BFM-50 scales.

Emotional stability turned out to be the strongest predictor of mindfulness in professional illusionists. Being mindful requires emotional composure, a feeling of harmony with the self, and a state of awareness. Previous research showed that mindfulness is associated with low levels of neuroticism, i.e., the opposite of

emotional stability (Baer et al, 2006). Emotional stability may translate into an individual's greater ability to tolerate different thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences (Giluk, 2009). The ability to control emotions is essential in training and performing as an illusionist – it allows for behavioral control (Stone, 2011). It also enhances objects manipulation on the stage and concentration on being “here and now”. Emotional stability, through mindfulness, is associated with better decision making, improves the knowledge of one's limitations, and increases the scope of perception, even eliminating the so-called inattentive blindness, i.e., a mechanism often used by illusionists in magic shows (Robinson, 2016).

Conscientiousness was found a second predictor of mindfulness, similarly as in the studies by Siegling and Patrides (2014). What these two variables have in common is the orientation towards present experiences and “here and now”. Being mindful requires being diligent and patient. Conscientiousness may be considered as the opposite of being unfocused, i.e., a state that illusionists cannot afford. As Carney (2012) points to, persistence in pursuing the goal is the basis of training, indispensable to achieve a high level of skills in the art of illusion. According to Giluk (2009, p. 806), “conscientious individuals are likely to be dependable, responsible, rule-abiding, and achievement-oriented”. These characteristics seem to refer to participants of the current study – such achievements as taking a place on the podium of the World Championships of Magic surely require diligence and extraordinary commitment, and the persistent pursuit of goals during the entire process of preparation for the championships and other performances (Mess, 2016).

A major limitation of the current study is the lack of a control group, which makes it impossible to assess whether the detected pattern of relationships between mindfulness and personality traits is specific for champions of magic or not. Another limitation is the sample size ($N = 50$) – small from the statistical point of view, but relatively sizeable when the uniqueness of the sampled population is taken into account. Future research, in addition to the replication of this study with a control group, may concentrate on other psychological variables important for professional illusionists, for example, job satisfaction or the need for social approval, as they both seem strongly related to acting as a performing artist.

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