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Vogel, E.

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Chapter 5

HUNGERS THAT NEED FEEDING

On the normativity of mindful nourishment

Abstract

Drawing on participant observation in a ‘mindful weight loss’ course offered in the Netherlands, this paper explores the normative register through which mindfulness techniques cast people in relation to concerns with overeating and body weight. The women seeking out mindfulness use eating to cope with troubles in their lives, while at the same time they are hindered by an unhelpful preoccupation with the size of their bodies. Mindfulness coaches aim to help them let go of this ‘struggle with eating’ by posing as the central question: ‘what do I *really* hunger after?’ The self’s hungers include ‘belly hunger’ but also stem from mouths, hearts, heads, noses and eyes. They cannot all be fed by food. The techniques detailed in this paper focus on recognizing and disentangling one’s hungers; developing self-knowledge of and a sensitivity to what ‘feeds’ one’s life; and the way one positions oneself in relation to oneself and the world. The paper argues that in this course, rather than introducing new norms, normativity is configured differently altogether, and so are the worlds people come to inhabit through engaging in self-care. In particular, the hungering body is foregrounded as the medium through which life is lived. Drawing on material semiotic work in Science and Technology Studies, this paper makes an intervention by articulating this normative register as an *alternative* to normalization. Thus I highlight material semiotics’ potential contribution to different ways of doing normativity and the development of better ways of living with overweight.

Keywords: *mindfulness, obesity, care, material semiotics, normalization*

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Introduction

'Mindful Eating is the New Diet', reads the headline in the Dutch daily newspaper *Trouw* (2012). 'The Netherlands keep getting heavier', the article cautions. 'To lose weight you must change your eating patterns. But this is easier said than done.' Mindfulness, we learn, is nothing like the usual 'crash diets' that aim at weight loss through restrictive calorie counting or set menus. The key to changing one's figure, these days, is changing one's mind.

Mindfulness, as it is sold (or oversold) (Brazier, 2013) in today's fast-paced, technological era, allegedly fixes a plethora of ailments, from parenting difficulties to crime to burnout. As the newspaper article quoted above illustrates, mindfulness is also often adopted as a promising new 'treatment' for obesity.⁴⁴ But the concern with whether mindfulness 'works' to counter the nation's expanding waistlines glosses over the interesting ways in which this practice reconfigures the ways this problem is understood and targeted. This paper explores the normative register through which a particular version of mindful eating, shaped by psychological knowledge and techniques, casts people in relation to concerns with (over)eating and body weight. To do so, I give an ethnographic account of a 'mindful weight loss' course, offered in the Netherlands, advertised as helping participants 'develop a healthy relationship with your body and yourself'. I show how the course shifts therapeutic goals from having a normal body to having a 'nourishing' life.

In public health circles, the relation between health norms and happiness is predominantly cast as one of mutual enforcement: being healthy will help one lead a happier, more productive life; being happy, in turn, leads to better health. In the mindfulness course I participated in it is precisely the conflict between health norms and happiness that is at stake. As it is articulated there, participants use eating to cope with troubles in their lives, while at the same time they are hindered by a unhelpful preoccupation with the size and shape of their bodies. Mindfulness coaches aim to help people let go of this 'struggle with eating' by posing the question: '*what do I *really**'

⁴⁴ Thus figuring in Randomized Controlled Trials (such as Dalen et al., 2010; Tapper et al., 2009). Paul Grossman (2011) argues such studies do not test mindfulness but rather psychology's 'positivist' re-inventions of this practice.

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hunger after? A focus on the physical characteristics of the body is replaced by an orientation towards desires. The shift, I suggest, lies not in the fact that mindfulness practices make people strive for different norms. Instead, normativity is configured differently altogether through these practices, and so are the worlds people come to inhabit through engaging in self-care. Drawing on material semiotic work in Science and Technology Studies, my aim in this paper is to articulate this normative register as an alternative to normalization. Along the way, then, I address how a material semiotic approach to analyzing these practices can contribute to a different way of *doing* normativity. This means that I am committed to learning from the specificities of this therapeutic practice rather than reporting on, critiquing or explaining its workings.

'Mindful weight loss'

In 2014, I participated in a course entitled 'Mindful weight loss'. It was publicized as focusing on 'learning how to look differently at, and get a different taste of, food and eating'. The course, set in a medium-sized city in the Netherlands, is taught by Karen, who, as she puts it, 'long struggled with [her] relationship with food and eating'. Mindfulness helped her to work through this struggle. Next, she became an independent coach to help people with similar problems. Karen was trained by three coaching programs in the Netherlands that explicitly contrast themselves with 'regular' dieting approaches, which they claim not only lead to bodily neglect but also cause disordered eating in a psychological sense. The course comprises a mindfulness focus on relaxation and attention, with psychological techniques borrowed from eating disorder treatments, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and a metabolic nutrition approach. The course itself is a fortnightly program of a total of eight sessions. No diagnosis is needed; everyone who pays can participate, although Karen might refer someone to a psychologist if she suspects an eating disorder.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The normativities of such a diagnosis are interesting in themselves, but lie outside the scope of this paper.

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In my ethnographic studies on overweight care practices in the Netherlands, I became interested in mindfulness as I saw its techniques make their way into diverse treatments, ranging from consultations with dieticians to clinical treatment before and after bariatric surgery. I was particularly intrigued as some clients and patients I met in these settings enthusiastically told me that it made them experience food as a substance to savor and enjoy rather than battle with. I wanted to know more. After meeting with Karen privately to discuss my interest in mindfulness, she invited me to join her course. I started by participating in an evening workshop introducing mindful eating, during which three other Dutch women (ages 27-60) and I subscribed to the more in-depth course. At the first meeting, I introduced myself as a researcher. After explaining I was eager to learn what benefits mindfulness might bring to people, I asked whether the other participants consented to my using their and my own experiences with the course in my research. Everyone readily consented and my position as a researcher did not explicitly come up again.

In contrast to typical practices in the consulting rooms of many doctors, weight consultants and dieticians, being weighed was not a part of these meetings. Obesity and overweight were not mentioned. Though some participants continued to weigh themselves at home, in Karen's therapeutic practice, overweight, as a particular condition to be measured and corrected on the body, is an 'absent presence'. It is absent because it is explicitly set aside as an object of intervention, but it is present as a concern of the participants who consider it detrimental to a good and healthy way of living.⁴⁶

The normative engagements of practitioners like Karen and those who trained her come strikingly close to points made in psychology and beyond on the harmful effects of contemporary norms of bodily control. For instance, Karen would not disagree with feminist cultural scholars who emphasize that eating disorders differ only in degree from more culturally accepted forms of dieting (Bordo, 1993; Greenhalgh, 2015; Gremillion, 2003), or with scholars in the fields of fat studies and critical dietetics criticizing the harmful effects of conflating health with weight (Rothblum et al., 2009).

⁴⁶ For a discussion on the normativities of using the *word* 'obesity' both as researchers and care practitioners, see (Warin & Gunson, 2013).

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Likewise, if this literature were more readily available to her, she would concur with Bryn Austin who calls eating disorders ‘the blind spot in the drive for childhood obesity prevention’, and may go along with his bold statement that ‘science’, with its calls for monitoring food intake and monitoring weight, is ‘complicit in a culture of disordered eating’ (2011). Mindfulness practitioners also hold that privileging biomedical norms of health risks obstructs interpersonal and embodied realities of eating (Yates-Doerr, 2012a) and ignores the ways in which eating is *not* about food (McIver, McGartland, & O’Halloran, 2009). Although for admitted commercial reasons the course title suggests the *goal* is losing weight, Karen often stressed that weight loss might be one of the *consequences* of developing a renewed relationship with food and eating, but should not be an aim in itself.

Bodies, norms and practices

In the Netherlands and elsewhere, metrics such as the Body Mass Index (BMI) not only construe, but materially constitute certain bodies as normal and others as abnormal and in need of intervention (De Laet & Dumit, 2014; Fletcher, 2014; Nicholls, 2013). Since Foucault, social theory has come to view such medical norms as proceeding from an interplay among social, technological and political imperatives that reflexively structure a particular kind of social order (1973 (1963)). The logic of adhering to bodily normalities or, for that matter, optimality (Rose, 2007)

holds that attending to bodies and their diseases will eventually lead to a better life, both individual and collective, as more productivity and lower health care costs ensure a better society (Foucault, 2014 (1979)). Thus, to be good citizens, people must engage in healthy eating, diet and exercise. This, to Foucault, is the role medicine plays in the governing of contemporary society: by foregrounding *normality* as something that everybody (‘every *body*’ (Mol, 1998, 280)) wants to strive for.

The social account of these norms may be (and has been) read as increasingly taking precedence over and structuring clinical encounters, people’s own evaluations of their health and bodies and the organization of

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society. Here, I will relate to this admittedly brief account of normalization in two ways. First, I want to learn how people, with the help of others and by means of various knowledges and techniques, give shape to such norms in situated ways. I am concerned with what Foucault in his later work termed 'arts of existence', what he defined as 'those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (Foucault, 2012 (1984), 10-11). These practices, he explains, are characterized by on the one hand, a focus on *training* – what the Greeks called *askesis* – and on the other, an orientation to something one deems *valuable*, a 'telos'.

In the provocatively titled paper 'Foucault goes to Weight Watchers', Cressida Heyes suggests that women try diet after diet, despite their evident failure, not (only) because they strive to reach a social ideal, but because they are attracted to the way of working on oneself that emerges in the day to day moments of dieting (2006). Specifically, meticulously attending to one's food and exercise enables capacities such as self-development, mastery, expertise and skill. Heyes argues that commercial weight loss organizations appropriate the *askesis* – specifically, working on self-knowledge, pleasures, capacities and self-care – to hide their complicity in normalizing webs of power. If these self-care practices are employed in a different context than Weight Watchers, however, they may have different effects and do more than reify or internalize subject positions of an order of the normal. The focus on training indicates that disciplinary techniques are productive; they reveal and multiply new competencies and ways in which it is possible to be a subject or a body. Through these self-cultivations, people may shape certain dominant discourses in situated, creative and relational ways of living. I show how in the mindfulness course people are taught to negotiate between and give shape to norms that they encounter, and to develop their own normative engagements. What is then worked on is the self's mediating and form-giving capacity under 'conditions that are not of one's choosing' (Brown & Stenner, 2009).

Notwithstanding the norms that are handed down to us and shape us in a variety of ways, I deem it important to appreciate that people have a

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heartfelt affinity with what they deem 'good', to things they value or are passionate about. This affinity suggests that what Antoine Hennion terms 'those things that hold us together' (2007: 98), are not (just) the norms through which we are *ordered* simultaneously as individuals and as part of a collective. They are also the ways we *organize* around common values, passions and concerns, and the way these passions organize *us*. Hennion positions himself against the sociological inclination to analyze taste, passion or value as a marker of social difference or as a product of social construction or false consciousness (2004). Instead, he invites us to follow the practices through which people express and develop their attachments to such diverse 'goods'. He describes the subject of such passions with the French term *amateur*, meaning 'any lay-person engaged in a systematic activity, which makes them develop, in various degrees, their sensitivities or abilities in that domain' (2007: 112). In these activities, people use different knowledges and techniques and try out various methods. I suggest mindful eaters may also be understood as amateurs. In their practice, they attach themselves not just to food or other 'objects' but also to themselves as bodies and selves. As a result, these entities variously reveal, multiply and transform themselves (Hennion, 2007: 101).

Second, then, my question is whether, and how, the worlds people come to inhabit through such practices may subvert the order of the normal and create alternative orderings in which people come to live with their concerns about body weight and eating. The mindfulness course I attended is interesting in that it explicitly positions itself against dieting and a focus on body size and weight. At the same time, it addresses the ways in which its participants are oriented towards these norms, and offers a new normative register through which each participant can concern herself with herself. The most relevant 'practice-specific alterities' (Van de Port & Mol, 2015) of mindfulness, I argue, lie not in the way it enacts, for instance, different versions of what the body is, but in the way it shifts normativities and activities around eating. In the course I participated in, activities and techniques are oriented towards the nourishment of hungers. Here, I will articulate this normative register of nourishment as an *alternative* to a normalizing order.

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In my analysis, I use the tools developed in Science and Technology Studies (STS), and specifically in material semiotics. A material semiotic approach studies ordering not as a monolithic apparatus but as something that emerges through practices, requires *active* associating, and results in not just one distribution but instead in *multiple* realities. Ordering as a practical endeavor, moreover, emphasizes its precarious and *emerging* nature (Law, 2002; Moser, 2005). Orderings, in this reading, always have partial connections to other orderings (Strathern, 2004). But attending to differences rather than coherences, and to process rather than product, also reflects a political commitment and normative engagement on the part of the social science analyst. To make this clearer, I repeat Ingunn Moser's important question: 'How can we avoid colluding with and adding to the power and dominance of an order of the normal?' (2005: 668). If we take up the old STS insight that to study the world is to change it (Hacking, 1983; Latour & Woolgar, 1979) the question of whether we read practices such as mindfulness as complicit in a normalizing ordering is not only an important empirical question. Rather, articulating it *as* an alternative becomes an active intervention.

The 'struggle with eating'

Every other week, Karen welcomes us into a cozy, high-ceiled room overlooking a park. One by one we enter, leaving our coats in the adjacent marble-floored foyer. As we sit down at a large oak dining table carrying tulips and candles, Karen pours us herbal tea. A whiteboard and two comfortable armchairs are placed in front of two bookcases displaying a range of psychological and coaching literature. Among these are publications of people involved in the coaching programs Karen is trained in, notably, 'Get rid of the Scale!' by nutritionist Meijke van Herwijnen (2012); 'Eat more! Feeling good with pure and healthy food' by dietician Karine Hoenderdos (2014); and 'Mindful weight loss' by Joanna Kortink (2015).⁴⁷ The latter book forms the core of the course and outlines its program. Every week we read a

⁴⁷ The English titles are my translations.

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chapter of Kortink's book and do the exercises that the book contains. Its language evokes inspirational self-help literature and a wellness culture that mixes Buddhist traditions of meditation and mindfulness with more 'Western' values of empowerment and authenticity.

Like Karen, Kortink comes out as having struggled with weight and eating problems all her life. It is this atmosphere of shared suffering, care and understanding that characterizes the meetings. In the book, readers are addressed in a didactic, but empathetic 'you', and Karen frequently says things like, 'Yes, that is what we do!' For instance, 'we' always prioritize everything but ourselves and our own bodies. The collective thus staged, that engages in dieting and suffers from certain self-defeating emotions and inclinations, is decidedly gendered (Bordo, 1993; Stinson, 2001). It may not be surprising that although the course addresses both men and women, the vast majority of participants are women.⁴⁸ These women, moreover, are able to spend time and money on diets and are accustomed to concerning themselves with their ways of eating and the particularities of their bodies. On Karen's website and in the books, there is talk of cycles of control and release and of love-hate relationships with food and the body. In the introductory workshop, the participants discuss what this troublesome relation with eating and one's body brings to bear: tension, low self-esteem, feelings of guilt and failure, overeating, weight gain and tiredness or stomach pains.

At some point during the introductory meeting, a 50 year old woman whom I call Margaret, shared, with the trust that comes from assuming to be amongst likeminded others, that she had tried almost every diet out there: low carb, Weight Watchers, even hormone therapy (which according to her was an excellent way to *gain* weight). Not so long ago, she was on a diet that restricted her to only eating dairy; she just couldn't stand the sight of yogurt anymore. Margaret proclaims that whenever she is on a restrictive diet, she only wants to eat whatever she is *not* allowed to eat at that point. And though she usually loses some weight initially, she always ends up gaining much more than she lost. Margaret concludes by saying she is tired of it and hopes that mindfulness will give her some relief.

⁴⁸ And because in my course, there were only women, I will speak of women from now on. All names are pseudonyms.

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Figure 3. The room where the course was held. *Photo by the author.*

These practices of sharing around ‘the struggle with eating’ perform the women’s life histories as strikingly similar. Even though no diagnosis is made, this common struggle provides points of engagement. In the course, the women will work on relieving this struggle to make way for better forms of self-care. The course is said to provide a ‘tool box’: in the meetings, people can explore which tools do something for them, and which do not (but might work later!). In line with this tool metaphor, what was drawn upon was not a coherent repertoire of knowledge, but various techniques that a person may value on the chance they help bring change in their lives.

I could relate to most of the everyday life struggles that were shared and, as a (middle class) woman, experience the norms and values that pose a problem here in my own life. However, I did not experience the severity of the suffering around eating and body size much in the same way. But since forms of self-care, rather than body size and weight loss, were the points of engagement, this was not an obstacle to joining exercises and discussions. Yet, my double role as researcher and participant had other effects. Whereas most participants were oriented to their own problems and therapeutic needs, I listened to the other women’s stories with a different ear. I was there not to

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find sympathy, but to sympathize and understand what they wanted mindfulness to do for *them*. By participating in the course, I let myself be affected by the normativities of my field, by what Karen and the course participants deemed 'good', worthwhile and beautiful – and what they worked against. My notes, written down in a notebook Karen handed out to us, were *field* notes, which after class I would write out further.

However, instead of suggesting that I was radically different from the others, perhaps it is more on point to say that all participants had partial connections to the 'common struggle'. For instance, not all participants' concerns with weight were the same. Catherine, a sixty year old woman, expressed her wish to no longer spend her life worrying about gaining and losing the same ten kilos. Meanwhile, before coming to the course, thirty year-old Anja's obesity made her concerned about her health and led her to seek out a gastric bypass surgery. After conversations with Karen, she ended up trying mindfulness first, persuaded by Karen's suggestion that any medical treatment 'would not fix the real issue'. Anja, then, was happy she was losing weight. Her weight loss was staged as a result of other changes in her life: regular meals, more exercising, different foods, a better job. She might have quit the program and opted for surgery after all without this result – but at present, her projects of weight loss and changing her life could combine in one program. In the following sections, I discuss how in the course what Karen called 'the real issue' took shape, and how in response, a particular orientation to a fulfilling life, modelled after eating, was proposed. I analyze how, as participants attempted to put this orientation into practice through exercises, reading and sharing, bodies and selves were configured in particular ways.

What do you *really* hunger after?

In Dutch, the object food and the verb eating are the same word: *eten*. And in fact, this conglomerate Dutch word *eten* accurately expresses the focus of the mindfulness course, as the what, when, why and how of *eten* are all enacted as intertwined and important. Mindfulness practitioners set themselves apart from common ways of addressing healthy eating by not focusing on *food* and

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its quantities and qualities, but instead starting out with and exploring ways of *eating*.

At the introductory meeting, the group came up with a wide range of reasons for eating: 'I eat when I'm not allowed something because of my diet', 'I always give in when I pass a lovely-smelling bakery' and 'I eat when I'm bored'. Karen categorizes these as 'hungers'; respectively; 'head hunger', 'nose hunger' and 'heart hunger', adding 'eye hunger', 'ear hunger', 'mouth hunger', 'belly hunger' and 'body hunger' on her whiteboard. The idea is that without drawing attention to them, people tend to confuse different hungers so that they have started to, for example, crave food when they feel lonely. This is unhelpful, or so Karen tells us, because food can only ever really satisfy the belly, through its nutrients, and the mouth, through its taste. Ultimately, Karen promises to work through eating to explore the question that she deems 'both profound and beautiful': what do you *really* hunger after? In this new framing, eating becomes evaluated differently.

This became evident when, at the beginning of each meeting, Karen asks us to reflect on what went well in the past weeks. On one such occasion, with an expression of resignation on her face, Suzan shares with the class that after talking with her ex, she went on an eating binge for the whole weekend. She says she realizes what a shame it is that her sense of failure about her binge and her worries about what it might do to her weight further burden her already pressing sadness about her divorce. Rather than a body out of bounds, it is these kind of situations, and the feelings and thoughts that are accompanied by them, which are the subject matter of the therapeutic practice of mindfulness.

The problem, as it is staged here, is not an abnormal body but an unhappiness of the person, in relation to her body or whatever else comes to bear in the course. The first contrast with an order of the normal, then, is that it is not the size of one's body that warrants participation in the course, but one's lived experiences and strategies of self-care. The stories of women like Margaret and Suzan draw out the plethora of ways in which people act on, with and from their bodies in relation to food and eating, and how the admonition to control one's weight interferes with them. Thus, although *eten* is explored in considerable detail, in many ways it is made peripheral to the

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core of the course. Often, subjects of an entirely different nature were discussed, such as Suzan's recent divorce, Catherine's unhappiness with her job and Anja's wish to make more time for herself. All kinds of daily life troubles, traumas and events came to the fore. The problem encountered in the course was that currently, participants live their lives with certain hungers unsatisfied.

Through hunger, Karen and the book reconfigure the problem away from food and body weight, towards a concern with self-care, taken here as various forms of *nourishment*. Living is modelled after eating throughout. Often, Karen insists, *eten* is not only burdened with problems it cannot solve; it is itself made into a problem that has gained too much weight. As Suzan's story illustrates, the struggles with blaming oneself for failing to lose weight, uncontrolled eating episodes or an 'obsession' with one's weight are staged as important factors in obstructing nourishment and therefore in need of attention. Mindfulness brings about new patterns and new ways of ordering in how a person concerns herself with herself.

Filling versus feeding

Whereas in dieting, hunger is something to suppress, the mindfulness course makes different kinds of hunger explicit and helps to create a space in which strategies of nourishment can be developed. The goal of the course is for participants to feed all the different hungers on their own terms. This means, first of all, to disentangle them. In the introductory workshop, we sit in pairs and discuss what it means to be 'really' hungry. Your stomach growls, headaches ensue and you lack energy. Then we think of examples when we eat but actually have a different need than belly hunger. Natalie says: 'at work, I sometimes eat to allow myself a break. I might just take a walk instead'. Lisa eats when she fights with her teenage son. When asked, she acknowledges that what she really *hungers after* is a good relationship with him, so Karen suggests she might think of better ways to work on that.

These insights depend on one's ability to recognize and act on one's hungers. Kortink's book asks its readers to consider whether, at a particular

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moment, they crave eating because they are truly hungry or because they want to fill up something else. Eating as ‘filling’ [*vullen*] happens when one eats without attention, gulping down food and feeling bad about it afterwards. Eating as ‘feeding’ [*voeden*], on the other hand, is a way of eating that becomes available through mindful eating: eating food that is nourishing, because you have belly hunger and not for some other reason. In class, we often sat down together with a small piece of food such as a nut or raisin, and were instructed to carefully feel, look at, smell, taste, chew and swallow the food item, calmly, with attention. We were encouraged to do the same by ourselves at home. This small socio-technical ‘dispositif’ has generative power (Gomart & Hennion, 1999). The logic of mindful eating is that attention builds in a pause between picking up a foodstuff and eating it. It does not make any food forbidden, but makes space to realize *why* one wants to eat it; and to question whether eating is actually the best way to feed one’s hunger. The technique should allow for several insights about *eten*: what it is exactly that food and eating *do* - and what they do *not* do.

Faced with the task of taming bodily urges that are perceived to be threatening and out of control, then, the strategy mindfulness proposes is not to discipline the act of ‘filling’ by force (mental or otherwise), but to slow the body down. Thus the body emerges as the home of various hungers, ranging from hunger and sleep to a need for social contact and a sense of self-worth; a home that participants are encouraged to slowly start inhabiting and caring for. Such inhabitation was further cultivated through techniques like meditation and the body scan, in which participants are encouraged to ‘travel’ with their attention through every part of their body (guided by Karen, a recorded voice on a website, or by oneself). Slowing down, however, was far from easy. Even though all participants were positive about the *idea* of mindfulness, and experienced its soothing effects in class, the small techniques proved difficult to incorporate into daily life. In one meeting, our homework consisted of keeping a ‘mindful diary’ (see figure 4), in which we should note down, among other things, what we ate, where we were and how we felt when eating it, rate seven types of hunger, and note down how satisfied we felt after eating it.

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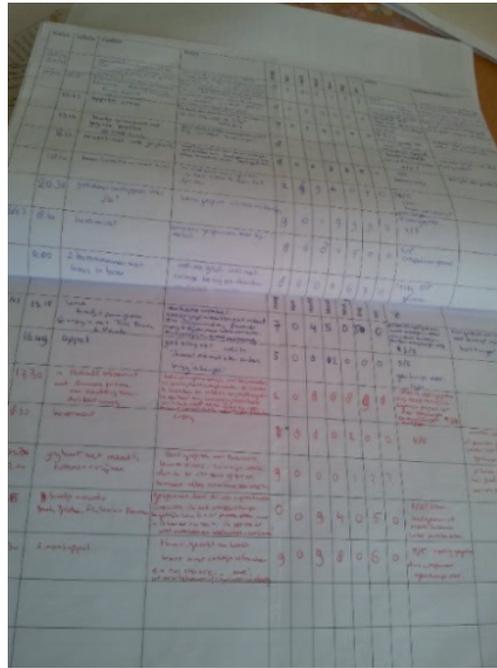


Figure 4. The mindfulness diary. *Photo by the author.*

Full of (auto-)ethnographic commitment, I started filling out the form, putting it next to me on my desk or dinner table so I would not forget. I still did not manage to fill out all the days. The next meeting, I turned out to be the only one who filled in the diary at all. It was not (just) the formal, school-like activity of the diary that prevented the other women from completing it; remembering and then taking the time for introspection during the day was experienced as too hard. This was also acknowledged by Karen: ‘If you take *one* bite with attention, this is already an improvement’. What participants worked on most of the time, then, is not how to respond to hungers, but on their ability to recognize them in the first place. Far from being indulgent, this embodied mode of living that values calm, well-fed pleasures becomes available through *askesis*, practical training. Knowledge provision resembles what psychologist James Gibson called an ‘education of attention’ (Gibson, 1979: 254) where ‘placed in specific situations, novices are instructed to feel

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this, taste that, or watch out for the other thing' (Ingold, 2000: 22). Learning about oneself and the world takes shape through evolving sensorial engagement with the world, while sharing and discussing such feelings with others.

In seeking nourishment, this practice does not perform a boundary between the physical, the feeding of one's body, and the spiritual, the feeding of one's soul. That is, the hungers described here should not be read as metaphorical.⁴⁹ Though not all of the hungers can be fed by food, they are staged as bodily and soulful at the same time. Hungering is not an act of a free will, nor is it a command; it is something a person must give shape to in her life. Only *as a body* can one experience pleasure, satisfaction, calm and comfort. In doing so, the hungering body is foregrounded as the medium through which life is lived.

Nourishing values

Taking hungers as a departure point rather than a notion of 'bodily needs' that could be generalized to all humans, serves to personalize care. Besides attending the course, Anja goes to a dietician who put her on a diet that does not allow her to eat dairy. Anja said she decided to divert from her dietician's advice because she likes yogurt in the morning so much. Karen compliments Anja on this decision. Approvingly, she says: 'always keep feeling what works for you. Remember, what we are offering are handholds, but it is *your* path, it has to work for you!' Handholds may help one to develop nourishing strategies, but lessons are always both specific (for 'my body') and processual (situated in daily life).

Whereas bodily norms such as weight draw human bodies under the same metric, then, an orientation to nourishment allows for differences between people. This does not mean, however, that while the medical and

⁴⁹ I owe this reflection to François Jullien's *Vital Nourishment* (2007). It must be noted, however, that Julien decries the co-optation of Chinese thought in wellness and health magazines, which he describes as 'the troubled waters in which "self-help" propagandists fish for the easy profits to be reaped at the expense of indolent minds' (21).

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dietary practices that mindfulness contrasts itself against are normative, in mindfulness the question of what to do is left to the subjective, private considerations of the person. This practice is not *less* normative; it just does norms differently. This became evident when Suzan expressed her wish to 'be strong' for her teenage daughters. Karen shows concern: 'I don't mean to... correct you, but why not let your children be part of your life and your difficulties? They can learn from you that they are allowed to show feelings and take up space when they are in pain. Practice what you preach!' The idea that *hungers need feeding* comes with an acceptance of one's own vulnerability. One might say that what is at stake is a conflict between the two norms of 'good motherhood' at play here. I would like to stress, however, that Karen's emphasis on self-compassion makes a crucial difference in the practices through which women are encouraged to *give shape* to such norms in their lives.

A normalizing order implies the 'bad' of pathology and abnormality, of not living up to a norm. The normative register of nourishment, by contrast, works against a different 'bad': the 'too bad' of a life that leaves hungers unfulfilled. Often, women were disappointed that they were still so far away from their goals, still struggling with the demands imposed on their bodies and themselves. But limits were never seen as fixed and always explored. Often, Karen urged us to be generous: 'remember that you have been doing it for so long! It is your process, you take on whatever you are ready for. Focus on the good: failures will come, but also see the growth!' In the fifth meeting, then, the practice of awareness allows Catherine to proudly tell her fellow course participants that that week, after work, instead of going about her usual routine of snacking in the car on the way home, she recognized that her actual ('heart') hunger was for a moment for herself, in a quiet space. To respond to that hunger, she took a detour through the countryside, enjoying nature, and arrived home with a clear mind and without the guilty feelings she would have had if she had eaten snacks. Getting away from a preoccupation with eating is valued not (only) for its eventual expression on a scale, but for its immediately nourishing effects. Such small successes are strived for. Rather than a possible outcome of a therapeutic practice, these are taken to be therapeutic and a source of nourishment in

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themselves. At one meeting, we celebrated that Catherine faced her husband and made clear that what she needs for a holiday is not an active hiking program but instead a quiet space to relax. Suzan proudly related her decision to take a few days off from her job to have time to grieve over her divorce, and Anja is praised for daring to engage in, and actually enjoying, workouts in a public park.

The attention to hungers requires acknowledging the ‘edibility’ of the world and the nourishment that may be brought by the activities one engages in, the people one meets and lives with and the food that one eats. It also requires recognizing that some activities, people and foods provide more nourishment than others. Mindful eaters work to become sensitized to such differences. In doing so, they cultivate the way one ‘eats’ the world.

Self-knowledge is an important component of the techniques of the self, developed through mindfulness. Specifically, we studied what ‘feeds’ our life. In the first meeting, Karen handed out little notebooks which, as she explained, would be our ‘happiness diaries’. Every day before going to sleep, we were encouraged to write down one positive aspect of our day: a nice moment with a friend or partner, something beautiful we saw, a compliment we received. We put the notebooks in our purses, while Karen explained that an orientation to positivity would itself bring positive change. Throughout the course, we were encouraged to reflect on what gives joy and purpose to our lives and link this to the values we hold dear. Part of our homework was to formulate goals for the next five years of what we wanted in life. The goals we articulated included things such as, ‘At least once a week I will spend some quality time together with my partner’, or ‘I want to be less controlling when it comes to my job’. The ‘telos’ of these self-care practices lies as much in the here and now as in the future. Orienting towards ‘truly valuable’ goals makes space for better forms of nourishment. As Karen repeatedly said, these reflections prevent one from ‘being a floating boat lost on the ocean’ and instead allow one to ‘take charge’ of one’s change instead.

Examining what one hungers after is a pursuit without end. Mindfulness therefore engages with goods (and ‘bads’) which do not take the shape of (ab)normalities. Instead, personal (and highly gendered) notions of a valuable life are implicated in what counts as appropriate change. These

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norms are not prescriptive, but permissive, opening up ways of living and being. That is, Karen presented her norms not as admonitions ('you should'), but as encouragements ('wouldn't it be nice if...'). All the exercises reconfigured life away from fruitless efforts to lose weight, commitments to keep in busy lives or admonitions about what is good or bad to eat, instead focusing on what is 'truly' nourishing and valuable. Throughout this process, one could experience personal growth. Karen talked, for instance, of 'blossoming', understood as bringing out the unique capacities that already lie within a person. Rather than *being* appreciated as the object of a normative judgment, mindfulness works to nurture the person's active appreciations, of one's food, one's life and of oneself.

Minding one's selves

In one of the exercises that was part of our homework, we were invited to write a 'letter to your body' indicating 'why your body is important to you'. Next, we had to write 'a letter from your body to yourself. Some dared to share their letters with the group, others deemed them too personal. For Suzan, the exercise brought to the fore how she always thought of her body as an unattractive, good-for-nothing obstacle. It took her a month to write the letter in which she expressed her wish to leave this pain behind. Her voice broke as she read: 'I always put the bar so high. And when I finally achieved my weight goal, I still wasn't happy'. In the letter she wrote impersonating her body, Suzan wrote: 'It hurt me to see you hurt yourself. I am happy you decided to come home'.

In the mindfulness course, it was explicitly not the body's constitution, size and shape that was problematized. Rather, the way a person concerned herself with herself emerged as problematic. The body came to the fore as this problem expressed itself in a struggle with eating. It was caught up in unhelpful strategies of self-care. 'Putting the bar high' was a common theme for all of us. In one meeting, Karen asked us to pair up and write down what we saw as the qualities of our partners. Catherine blushed and could hardly listen as I read out to her what I wrote down: that I was impressed by

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her ability to keep a fulltime job while caring for her husband, children and her handicapped sibling, and that it appeared to me as if over her years Catherine has learned a lot about herself. Expressing such appreciation of others, Karen pointed out, 'shows how unforgiving we often are with ourselves. The nasty things we say to ourselves, we would never dream of saying to anyone else'.

Slowly, we were encouraged to take up positions that have 'our best interests at heart'. In her ethnography of an inpatient treatment clinic for anorexia, Helen Gremillion describes how psychologists encourage patients to make a distinction between their 'self, who knows what would truly be beneficial, and the 'anorexia' part of themselves that makes them want to lose weight in unhealthy ways (2003). Similarly, in the mindfulness course, an authentic self was staged and appealed to for engaging in better forms of nourishment. This 'real self' was contrasted with so-called internal critics, several of which are laid out in Kortink's book: the perfectionist, helpless, insecure, limitless, bossy, or lazy parts of a person that have emerged and become powerful somewhere during one's life. They are old strategies of feeding oneself that risk stagnating, obstructing nourishment in the here and now, causing someone to engage in cycles of release and control in relation to eating. They were discussed by zooming in on the cacophony of voices (dialogues, reflections, admonitions) that existed in the women's thoughts. Karen explains that every new fact on 'healthy food this, *bad* food that' provides the critics with ammunition. We learn there is a critic at work in the thought, 'you worked so hard today, you deserve that bag of cookies', but also in 'from tomorrow onwards, I should cut off half my calories'.

By writing out dialogues, women learn to position themselves alongside the critics, in the role of their 'true self'. 'The trick is to engage your critic in a way so that it dares to look at alternative strategies', Karen explains. At some point during the fifth meeting, when we have practiced with these dialogues for some time, Suzan confesses: 'Before, I wanted to subject myself to a strict shake diet, get rid of a bunch of kilos, and then start this mindfulness thing. I still have this thought sometimes, but now I see the saboteur in it'. It is sabotaging, she elaborates, because she has tried diets on and off for all her life to no avail, in an effort to feel worthy and beautiful. Co-

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opting the mindfulness course as just another diet means doing little to change to more nourishing strategies. So as she writes out the dialogue, she answers her critic: 'I know you want the best for me, but I have tried that road so many times, now I want to try something different'. The critic may then negotiate about what is acceptable change. It appears that feeding hungers was the *modus operandi* of the subject all along. The critics also respond to (heart) hungers: they try to find fulfilment for the hunger for acceptance, contact or comfort. It was their strategies to do so that were harmful. By focusing on nourishing the hunger at stake, both the real self and its critic (as played out on paper, anyway) may, as allies, come to realize that neither imposing harsh rules on the body nor taking refuge in food will be of much help.

It is worth noting that Suzan describes herself as *having a thought*. This is in line with the phrasing proposed in the course. Instead of being a form of narration or expression, thoughts become 'events', to which more than one response is possible. In these psychological techniques these events were framed as the voices of internal critics. Alternatively, in line with meditation practices, we learned we could distance ourselves from thoughts through attention, as in one exercise in which we were to imagine our thoughts 'drifting by as clouds in our head'. With this exercise, Catherine noticed how liberating it can be to observe, 'oh, I notice I have the thought again that I am fat', without having to take the thought seriously. Kortink, in her book, proposes that rather than listening to them, one may evaluate them: 'Does this thought further a valuable life?'

Through the externalizing techniques I described, the subject emerges as a composite of conflicting positions and incoherencies, full of anxieties, perfectionism and temptations, but also more caring, self-compassionate voices. Though only one of these is designated as the 'true self', I argue that what is shaped here is not an identity. Rather than the occupation of a fixed position, it is the activity of *positioning*, in relation to one's body, oneself and the world, that is transformative.

On several occasions, the exercises were difficult to complete. Catherine, for example, after trying to write out dialogues at home, sighed that 'her' internal critic desperately shouts 'No, No, No!' every time she tried

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to reason with it. On another occasion, after a meditation exercise in which for a few minutes we had to imagine opening a door to a different life, Anja said she did not see any door and was not comfortable with such exercises. The internal space that is or is not conjured up, is thus not in our heads, but emerges in an activity, in *minding*, and is made possible by the concentrated class setting, the notebooks, the other participants and the examples in the books. Only then is it possible to concern oneself with oneself. The promise of these exercises is that the participant's way of eating-the-world is reconfigured to the effect that self-neglect makes way for self-care, opening up to a healthier, more fulfilling life. This reconfiguration also moderates how, to what extent and for what purpose societal and scientific norms about a good body and good eating are 'internalized'. What is internal and external, moreover, shifts: as we share and respond to one another, the self comes to be (in) the other, while the attention to critics and thoughts-as-events stage others within our own selves. The unravelling of these is what constitutes the art of mindful living.

Conclusion

Judging is after the fact, distanced, a separate activity. Appreciation emerges in the doing. In this paper I have explored how people, in their self-care practices, give shape to and mediate norms that are posed to them. I have also explored different ways in which normativity is done. I argue that the techniques described in this paper shift the normative register in which eating and living well take shape. Mindfulness is not a practice of *norming*; of taming variety in bodies, subjects or behavior by means of metrics, standards or categories. Neither is this practice geared towards the recovery or appropriation of an identity, for instance a 'thin self' or 'new me' that one can then try to live up to (Heyes, 2006; Throsby, 2008). Instead, it orchestrates a different form of change altogether: one that is not enacted as a correction on a body out of bounds, but as a search for nourishment. While engaging in nourishment, what is 'good' to do cannot be found in measuring oneself against general rules of conduct or advice. Instead, one may sense and

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appreciate such goods from inside oneself. In this sense, the starving body is foregrounded as the medium through which life is lived.

How to best feed hungers? Karen emphasized that the previous strategies of self-care women engaged in led to tension, feelings of guilt and failure, weight gain, tiredness and stomach pains. As it was staged in the course, these strategies kept hungers unfulfilled, leaving the body frustrated, full of anxieties, perfectionism and temptations. Mindful living, then, is not a readily available way of living. Rather, it requires training. In this training, I highlighted three steps. First, the normative register of 'hungers need feeding' depends on *attention* to one's hungers, achieved through a slowing down of the body. Only through attending to them can they be disentangled, recognized and fed on their own terms. Second, feeding hungers begins with a search for what one finds nourishing. Here, it is not only nourishment itself that is considered valuable; the process of searching for and orienting towards what one finds nourishing is appreciated as transformative in itself. Third, the self is staged as composed of a collection of conflicting positions and incoherent thoughts towards oneself and the world. Given this, one tries to first find and then live from that position that has one's best interests at heart. All of these steps re-organize daily life, and the ways in which one positions oneself in relation to events internal to the subject and in outside encounters with the world.

The subject of this mode of ordering learns to 'feed' herself and orient herself towards what she finds important, beautiful and pleasant. Instead of aiming to conform to norms imposed on her by society, she learns to concern herself with herself in a different way. Mindfulness practitioners attend to *their* hungers, *their* path. What is developed is the self's mediating and form-giving capacity under 'conditions that are not of one's choosing' (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Such mediating and form-giving depends on continuous minding of tasting, feeling and observing what one hungers after, and of the nourishing qualities of such diverse things as food, the countryside and friends. This way of living with overweight is not easy – and it is precarious. At any moment, the techniques could fail, because they were too threatening, too laborious, or too unusual. The steps through which the women nourished their lives were always small.

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Material semiotic approaches typically study the *how*, rather than the *why* of ordering. They analyze practices and the emerging multiple realities they enact. The implication is that norms – notions of bodily needs, a normal body size, a good person – do not do their work automatically. They must be continuously remade in practices – scientific, medical, political and everyday. This means that sometimes, even in therapeutic practices that concern themselves with overeating and body weight, they can also, if only temporarily, be *redone* or even *undone*. The alterity I attended to here, I underline, is not pure and beyond criticism. It is interspersed with partial connections to processes of normalization. The co-optation of mindfulness as a promising new weight loss intervention attests to that. With my articulation, then, I do not claim that this course breaks free from or has the potential to overturn an order of the normal. But the realities enacted in this course cannot be reduced to normalization either.

How can we, as scholars, appreciate this difference? If ordering is a practical endeavor, then, to use Donna Haraway's words: 'it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with, it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties' (2013: 3). It is precisely in emphasizing, and exploiting, the researcher's involvement in how ties are tied that material semiotics contributes to different ways of doing normativity. In my analysis, in a classic material semiotic move, I have emphasized the contrasts and conflicts with normalization, in the hope of thus strengthening the invention and fostering of better ways of living in situations where overweight is a concern.

For this, or so is my risky assertion, is what we learn from this therapeutic practice. Its techniques, materials and exercises facilitate taking different subject positions, opening up the possibilities of action, and ultimately developing different ways of being. The normativities implied in mindfulness techniques shape processes of becoming. The limits and shape of what is cared for do not precede these practices, *nor* are they enacted *in* them. Their open-endedness, the 'not-yet-enacted', is exactly what characterizes them. This openness is what feeds the hope of alleviating the suffering in everyday life that motivates self-care practices.