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# Hungers that Need Feeding: On the Normativity of Mindful Nourishment

Else Vogel

Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## 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 and are hindered by a 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. While introducing new norms, the course configures 'goods' and 'bads' in different ways altogether, shaping 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. Taking a material semiotic approach, this paper makes an intervention by articulating the normative register of nourishment in contrast to normalization. Thus, it highlights anthropologists' potential strengthening of different ways of doing normativity.

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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 burn-out (Cook 2016). As the newspaper article quoted above illustrates, mindfulness is also often adopted as a possible solution for obesity. But the concern with whether

mindfulness ‘works’ to counter the nation’s expanding waistlines glosses over the interesting ways in which this practice reconfigures how this problem is understood and targeted.

This paper explores how 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 leading a ‘nourishing’ life.

The idea of the course is that participants arrive using eating to cope with troubles in their lives, and are hindered by a preoccupation with the size and shape of their bodies. Mindfulness coaches aim to help them let go of this ‘struggle with eating’ by posing the question: ‘what do I *really* hunger after?’ A focus on the physical characteristics of the body is replaced by an orientation towards desires. The interesting shift, I suggest, lies not in the fact that mindfulness practices make people strive for different norms. Rather, how to relate to norms is configured differently altogether, and so are the worlds people come to inhabit through engaging in self-care. While feeding hungers, what is ‘good’ to do cannot be found in measuring oneself against general rules of conduct or advice. Instead, one may sense and appreciate such goods from inside oneself. In this sense, the hungering body is foregrounded as the medium through which life is lived.

I am committed to learning from the specificities of this therapeutic practice rather than reporting on, critiquing or explaining its workings. Taking a material semiotic approach (Mol 2002; Law 2002), this paper’s premise is that the ordering of bodies, subjects and daily life practices does not follow from some monolithic apparatus but requires active associating, resulting not just in one distribution but instead in *multiple*, partially connected realities (Strathern 2004; Moser 2005). Attending to differences rather than coherences, and to process rather than product, reflects a political commitment and normative engagement on the part of the social science analyst. If ordering is a practical endeavor, then, to use Donna Haraway’s words: ‘it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties’ (2013, 3). My aim in this paper, then, is to articulate the normative register of *nourishment* emerging from these practices in contrast to, and as an alternative to normalization, thus hoping to strengthen different ways of doing normativity. 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). The question of whether we read practices such as mindfulness as complicit in normalizing ordering is thus not only an important empirical question. Rather, making differences becomes an active intervention.

### **Mindful weight loss**

In 2014, I participated in a course entitled ‘Mindful weight loss’. It was advertised as focusing on ‘learning how to look differently at, and get a different taste of, food and eating’. The course was taught by Karen, who, as she put it, ‘long struggled with [her] relationship with food and eating’. After having been introduced to mindfulness, she became an independent coach to help people with similar problems.<sup>1</sup> 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 mindfulness with psychological techniques borrowed from eating disorder treatments and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The course itself is a program of a total of eight sessions. A doctor's diagnosis is not needed; everyone who pays can participate, although Karen might refer someone to a psychologist if she suspects an eating disorder.

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 (Vogel 2016; Vogel & Mol 2014). Some clients and patients I met in these settings enthusiastically told me that mindfulness helped 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 participate in an evening workshop introducing mindful eating, during which three other Dutch women (ages 27–60 years) and I subscribed to the more in-depth course. At the first meeting, I introduced myself as a researcher. 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, weighing 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. 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 (Fletcher 2014; De Laet and Dumit 2014). 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 [1979] 2014). 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.

As Dutch public health efforts increasingly emphasize self-care and responsibility, 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 society. Moreover, as anthropologists, feminists and

cultural scholars have argued (Gremillion 2005; Bordo 1993), normalization also works through, for instance, popular media including celebrities, fashion magazines and cosmetics commercials that present beauty ideals privileging ever thinner bodies, especially for women.

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 [1984] 2012), 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 hand, 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.

These self-care practices, particularly when employed in a different context than Weight Watchers, however, may 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 (cf. Yates-Doerr 2012). What is then worked on is the self’s mediating and form-giving capacity under ‘conditions that are not of one’s choosing’ (Brown and Stenner 2009). 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 ‘struggle with eating’*

Every other week, Karen welcomes us into a cozy, high-ceiled room overlooking a park (see Figure 1). 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 was trained in, entitled ‘Get rid of the Scale!’ by Meijke van Herwijnen (2012); ‘Eat more! Feeling good with pure and healthy food’ by Karine Hoenderdos (2014); and ‘Mindful weight loss’ by Joanna Kortink (2015). Every week we read a chapter of Kortink’s book and do the exercises that the book contains. Its language evokes inspirational self-help literature and a wellness culture



**Figure 1.** The room where the course was held. Photo by the author.

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 (Stinson 2001; Bordo 1993). Although the course addresses both men and women, the vast majority of participants are women. Moreover, these are women who have (and can) spent time and money on diets, and who are accustomed to concerning themselves with their ways of eating and the particularities of the shape, size and cravings 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<sup>2</sup> shared with the group 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 proclaimed 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 concluded by saying she is tired of it and hopes that mindfulness will give her some relief.

These practices of sharing around ‘the struggle with eating’ present 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.

As a (middle class) woman, I could relate to most of the everyday life struggles that were shared, and 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. While most participants were oriented to their own problems and therapeutic needs, I came for the stories of the other women. I was there not to find sympathy, but to sympathize and understand what they wanted mindfulness to do for *them*. By participating in the course, I thus aimed to become affected by what Karen and the course participants deemed ‘good’, worthwhile and beautiful—and what they worked against. My notes were *field* notes, which after class I would write out further.

However, instead of suggesting that I was somehow 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 60-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, 30-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’.

In the following section, I discuss how in the course what Karen called ‘the real issue’ took shape. The sections after that detail techniques that work on, respectively: 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.

### **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 its quantities and qualities, but instead 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 kinds of situations, and the feelings and thoughts that are accompanied by them, which are the subject matter of the therapeutic practice of mindfulness. A first contrast with an order of the normal appears: 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 stories of women like Margaret and Suzan draw out myriad 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 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.

In focusing on hunger, Karen and Kortink's book, rather than food and body weight, problematize self-care, taken here as various forms of *nourishment*. Living is modeled after eating throughout. The problem encountered was that currently, participants live their lives with certain hungers unsatisfied. 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.

### **Filling versus feeding**

While 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.

Kortink's book asks its readers to consider whether, at a particular 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. 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. In Joanna Cook's (2015) words: in mindfulness detachment and engagement are 'dialectically constitutive' (221).

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 belly 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' 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 techniques proved difficult to incorporate into daily life. In one meeting, our homework consisted of keeping a 'mindful diary', 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.

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 others 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. Learning about oneself and the world takes shape through evolving sensorial engagement with the world, while sharing and discussing such feelings with others.

The hungers described here should not be read as metaphorical, as spiritual rather than physical. Though not all of the hungers can be fed by food, they are staged as bodily and soulful at the same time. Only *as a body* can one experience pleasure, satisfaction, calm and comfort. In doing so, the starving 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).

While bodily norms such as weight draw human bodies under the same metric, an orientation to nourishment allows for differences between people. This does not mean, however, that while the medical and dietary practices that mindfulness contrasts itself against are normative, in mindfulness the question of what to do is left to the private considerations of the person. This practice is not *less* normative; it does ‘goods’ 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!’ 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. Ordering self-care practices in ways that foster nourishment, by contrast, works against a different ‘bad’: the ‘too bad’ of a life that leaves hungers unfulfilled. Frequently, 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 it was actually her ‘heart’ that hungered for a moment for herself, in a quiet space. To respond to that hunger, she took a detour through the countryside, enjoying nature. She 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. 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 comes from engaging in activities, meeting people and eating food. It also requires recognizing that some activities, people and foods provide more

nourishment than others. Mindful eaters work to become sensitized to such differences. Developing self-knowledge, and studying what ‘feeds’ one’s life, are thus important components of the techniques of the self-developed through mindfulness. 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. 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. 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. Personal notions of a valuable life are thus implicated in what counts as appropriate change.

Although satisfaction and personal growth are part of the process, examining what one hungers after is a pursuit without end. Mindfulness engages with goods (and ‘bads’) which do not take the shape of (ab)normalities. It offers norms, but rather than prescriptive, they are permissive, opening up ways of living and being. That is, Karen presented participants not with admonitions (you should), but answered expressions of suffering and longing with encouragements (wouldn’t it be nice if ...). She talked 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, techniques work to nurture the person’s active appreciations, of one’s food, one’s life and oneself.

### **Minding 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 revealed 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’.

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’ 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 became powerful somewhere during one’s life. They are old strategies of feeding that stagnated, 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 make your critic dare 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-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 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 fulfillment 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'. 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', the aim here is not to shape an identity. Rather than the occupation of a fixed position, it is the activity of *positioning*, in relation to oneself and the world, that is transformative. Its promise is that self-neglect makes way for self-care. 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 to reason with it. The internal space that is or is not conjured up, 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. This reconfiguration also moderates how and to what extent 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 unraveling of these is what constitutes the art of mindful living.

### The normativity of mindful nourishment

Body 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 (Law 2002; Moser 2005). 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 field of Fat Studies offers resistance to the normalizing powers of BMI bell curves, weighing scales and food advice through *escape*—embracing fat as a source of pride, pleasure, beauty and celebration (Rothblum, Solovay, and Wann 2009). But as auto-ethnographic accounts of several scholars in fat studies testify (Murray 2010; Longhurst 2012), political efforts to reclaim fatness fail to negate normalizing orders, creating paradoxes and conflicts as norms are lived and embodied.

The normative engagements of practitioners like Karen and those who trained her come strikingly close to points made in anthropology 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 (Gremillion 2003; Bordo 1993; Greenhalgh 2016), or with critiques of the conflation of *health* with *weight* typical in biomedical discourses (Rothblum, Solovay, and Wann 2009). Her course addresses the *practical* ways in which its participants are oriented towards such powerful norms. Karen emphasized that the previous strategies of self-care women engaged in kept hungers unfulfilled, leaving the body frustrated, full of anxieties, perfectionism and temptations. The course offers a new normative register through which each participant can concern herself with herself.

Self-care practices, then, do not always and already serve to create the forms of reflexive subjectivity neoliberalism thrives on (Cook 2016). How can we, as scholars, *appreciate* their different effects? As mindfulness techniques enact different versions of what the body or subject *is*, we might emphasize a difference in *ontologies*. But the ‘practice-specific alterities’ (Van de Port and Mol 2015) to highlight here, I suggest, lie in the way the course shifts normativities and activities around eating and living.

Feeding hungers is not a readily available alternative way of living. Rather, it requires training. In this training, I highlighted three steps. First, the normative register of nourishment 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 reorganize 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.

That said, the course markets itself as a weight loss program, and people expect or hope to lose weight. The normative register I attended to here, I underline, is interspersed with partial connections to normalizing distributions. Normative registers mix and flow over into the other.<sup>3</sup> The co-optation of mindfulness as a promising new weight loss intervention attests to that. Furthermore, mindful eating does little to challenge the social and political causes of health issues beyond how they affect the individual. The course's way of enacting problems and solutions, moreover, may help establish new 'normalities', in which not (just) the size of their bodies, but overweight people's strategies for nourishment are cast as 'abnormal' too. This might reiterate a duty to 'work on oneself' and enforce individual responsibility and blame. With my articulation, then, I do not claim that the course is beyond criticism and breaks free from an order of the normal. But the realities enacted in this course cannot be reduced to normalization either.

## Conclusion

The mindfulness activities I participated in were not directed towards *norming*; towards 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. 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.

The subject of the normative register of nourishment learns to 'feed' herself and orient herself towards what she finds important, beautiful and pleasant. This orientation 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. Judging is after the fact, distanced, a separate activity. Appreciation emerges in the doing. 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.

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, I assert, is what we learn from this therapeutic practice. Its techniques facilitate taking different subject positions, opening up the possibilities of action, and ultimately developing different ways of being. 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.

## Notes

1. In the Dutch semi-private health care system, health professionals often hold such independent positions, making them both care-worker and entrepreneur.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. For a related discussion whether eating practices of competitive eaters may concomitantly attest and uphold dominant notions of 'good eating', see Abbots and Attala (2014).

## Ethical approval

The study was undertaken following local ethics committee approval. Consent was verbally obtained and to ensure anonymity the excerpts from transcripts used in this paper are not identifiable individual interviews or observations.

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