Where contemplation meets science: Interview with Julieta Galante

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Julieta Galante is the Deputy Director of the Contemplative Studies Centre at the University of Melbourne. Her work lies at the intersection of contemplative research and public health, with a particular focus on assessing the efficacy of meditation techniques in promoting mental health. She is also a founding member of the Emergent Phenomenology Research Consortium. In this interview, I talk with Dr. Galante about what contemplative studies are, the challenges of bringing together scientific and religious worldviews, the potential benefits and harms of mindfulness practices, and her recent work on meditation-induced altered states of consciousness. We conclude by discussing the future of this rapidly evolving field of research.


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Question – Your work falls under the umbrella of contemplative studies. What defines this field of research?

Answer – The term 'contemplative studies' has become increasingly popular in recent years. I think this has been driven by the growing number of researchers from different disciplines studying mindfulness and meditation and their adoption in contemporary cultures. Researchers started doing this within their own disciplines, for example neuroscience, psychology, education, anthropology or religious studies. But then, many started to realize that it was too reductionistic to study these practices in isolation. This, along with the need to have a field that could study contemplative practices other than mindfulness and meditation (or in combination with them), gave rise to the emergence of contemplative studies, a field strongly characterized by its interdisciplinarity.

Q – Bringing together the worldviews of modern science and ancient religious and spiritual traditions seems both enriching and challenging. What are some of these challenges?

A – One key challenge is conceptual translation: many contemplative traditions use metaphors and frameworks that don't map neatly onto scientific language or methodologies. There's also a risk of reductionism: in seeking to measure outcomes, science can oversimplify practices that were originally embedded in rich ethical and philosophical systems. Another tension arises around power and ownership: ensuring that research honors the origins of these practices without appropriating or commercializing them. And of course, researchers must guard against biases that arise from either overly skeptical or overly enthusiastic positions.

Q – What types of research projects are being carried out at the Contemplative Studies Centre?

A – At the Centre we focus on the pragmatic end of the spectrum. We do observational research to understand how contemplative practices are being used in Australia and other societies. When we test interventions, we do it in real-world settings, assessing their effects in everyday life. Most of our studies investigate contemplative practice in non-clinical community settings; and most, but not all, look into meditation practices. We are interested in the initial effects of learning these practices, but also in the effects of regular, long-term practice.

Part of this pragmatic approach is that we try to understand how implementation decisions affect effectiveness, safety profiles, and costs. Another aspect we are interested in is how these practices are being secularized. We study practitioners, but also teachers and researchers. We also involve practice communities and other stakeholders whenever possible. Finally, one aspect that we are following closely is how these practices intersect with ethical, social justice, and diversity issues. As you can imagine, we need a highly multidisciplinary approach to do justice to these complex topics!

Q – Mindfulness meditation has been one of the central themes within contemplative studies, to which your research has contributed significantly. What first led you to study mindfulness?

A – I was serendipitously introduced to meditation when I was a medical student, and that led me to get to know these other cultures that have such different concepts of health and the body than those I was being taught. I became fascinated with this. At the same time, I found meditation very beneficial to keep my own anxieties at bay and develop as a person. I thought that this tool could be useful to many others, but I did not want to assume that; I wanted to do rigorous research to understand who could benefit and how. Having said that, not even in my wildest dreams would I have thought those days that I could make a career out of it!

Q – One of your main research questions is whether mindfulness-based programs are effective in promoting mental health (e.g., Galante et al., 2021; 2023). How are mindfulness practices beneficial for mental health?

A – There is a transdiagnostic element to mindfulness training. This means that it targets processes that are behind the development of several mental health conditions, such as emotion regulation, self-awareness, or decentering. Therefore, it is likely that mindfulness-based programs, if tailored appropriately, can work well across a spectrum of conditions and severity. However, this does not mean they work well for everyone, as we know from empirical research in recent years.

Q – Actually, you and others have warned that mindfulness practices may not be useful for all conditions and individuals, and may sometimes even have adverse effects (e.g., Van Dam & Galante, 2023). Could you tell us a little more about this?

A – Indeed. First of all, it is very clear that you cannot impose mindfulness training on people. And this includes children: there are now at least three large trials, some of the largest in meditation research, showing that including mindfulness in school curricula does not work and can do more harm than good. In addition, we don't have evidence that mindfulness is better than other programs targeting mental health promotion, for example physical exercise or cognitive-behavioral therapy. In preventive behavioral interventions, engagement

is key so people's interests and affinity with practices will make a big difference. Therefore, it's always good to offer options.

Regarding adverse effects, even if research shows that most people benefit from mindfulness for mental health promotion, a significant minority can experience adverse effects, such as increased anxiety, dissociation, or resurfacing of trauma, that will limit their day-to-day functioning to some degree. It is important that people who start the practice are made aware of this possibility, and that they have someone they can turn to for support if this happens. We know that people using apps to meditate, for example, can get into tricky territory, and often they have very few people around, if anyone, to share this with. While this area is developing, both research- and practice-wise, we need to keep raising awareness that adverse effects can and do happen.

Q – More recently, you have also been interested in whether mindfulness-based programs can lead to altered states of consciousness (e.g., Galante et al., 2024). What's your main takeaway from these studies?

A – Our early findings suggest that altered states, ranging from deep absorption to experiences of ego dissolution, can and do arise in mindfulness practice, even in secular or clinical contexts. These states are often reported as beneficial and meaningful but can also be confusing or destabilizing without proper support, especially if the practitioner did not know that they could arise. The takeaway is that mindfulness interventions, even when simplified for public health use, can catalyze profound shifts in perception. This reinforces the need for informed consent, for facilitators to be well-trained and for programs to include opportunities to discuss these experiences and provide frameworks for integration.

Q – This issue relates to the activity of the Emergent Phenomenology Research Consortium that you and others founded in 2020. Could you briefly tell us what the vision and goals of this initiative are?

A – The Consortium brings together researchers, clinicians, and contemplative practitioners to explore and understand the full range of experiences that can emerge through contemplative practices. Its goals include developing ethical standards, creating a shared language to describe emergent phenomena, and informing best practices for support and integration.

Q – Finally, a look at the future. The field of contemplative studies is relatively young. How do you see it evolving over the next two decades, and what developments are you most excited about?

A – I'm hoping we'll see a maturation of the field, with more nuanced and pluralistic approaches to both research and practice. I'm excited about a move toward co-produced research and practice with local communities. Methodologically, I expect larger collaborative studies and advances in mixed methods and interdisciplinarity to offer richer accounts of contemplative experience. But perhaps most importantly, I hope we keep asking difficult questions rather than settling into easy narratives.

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Further reading

Centro de Estudios Contemplativos: https://psychologicalsciences.unimelb.edu.au/CSC

Consorcio de Investigación en Fenomenología Emergente: https://theeprc.org

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