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Breathe In, Breathe Out: Utilizing Mindfulness in the Social Work Practicum

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BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT: UTILIZING MINDFULNESS IN THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM

by

Allison Leigh Leonard

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

Social Work
in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology

Approved:

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Abstract

Mindfulness is defined as the ability to be aware of your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and actions – in the present moment – without judging or criticizing yourself or your experience (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). It has been used in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. Within the context of social work, mindfulness can be used to prevent burnout and increase awareness. This paper reports research on teaching mindfulness techniques with the purpose of training students to use mindfulness and improve their professional development. Specifically, the paper presents the following: review of current literature on the professional use of mindfulness; a description of the research design and methods; and analysis of the data; and a discussion of the implications for the use of teaching mindfulness to prevent burnout and increase awareness.

Keywords: mindfulness, burnout, practicum

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Breathe In, Breathe Out: Utilizing Mindfulness in the Social Work Practicum

Introduction and Review of the Literature

The practicum internship experience is the most significant component of social work education for professional development. During the internship, students experience a wide variety of stressors in reference to performance expectations (Birnbaum, 2008). It is important that students are equipped with skills for improving professional self-efficacy, increasing positive self-esteem, and perceiving less work-related stress.

Mindfulness is a valuable skill that can be applied in a variety of ways. Research studies have shown mindfulness skills to be effective in increasing relaxation and coping skills when faced with stressful situations (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). Social workers are faced with many challenges and frustrations associated with their work. They cope with many sources and layers of stress because of the nature of their work (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011). A review of the literature shows us that that use of mindfulness is ever expanding.

As mindfulness has been studied, it has been recognized as a "concentrated attention on the present moment, with mind and body open, receptive, and free from biases, pre-interpretation, and prejudgment… a fundamental unity of body and mind" (Sherman and Siporin, pp. 261). As noted here, mindfulness is not merely mind *over* body it is a complete unity of mind *and* body. So in essence, mindfulness is the ability to be aware of your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and actions (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). Sherman and Siporin (2008) recognize that this skill needs to be practiced daily to reduce distraction and be fully engaged in the tasks at hand. Mindfulness is also a skill that is intuitive within social work practice:

> The contemplative approach represents a relation to reality, to nature, and to human beings that includes, yet goes beyond, the instrumental way of life and

> offers a way of living and being that fosters mind and body unity as well as individual and social development. This is quite consistent with social work values of self-determination and self-fulfillment, social and societal well-being, and social justice (pp. 271).

There are many different ways that mindfulness can be utilized and applied; this makes it a universal tool for all those who use it. Many authors provide guidebooks that inform us of the selection of or ways to use mindfulness. Smith's (2005) relaxation theory suggests using muscle relaxation, relaxing self-talk, and breathing exercises in order to "reduce stress, enhance resistance to disease, recover from illness, increase energy and stamina, and even cultivate insight, creativity, and spirituality (pp. 3). Sherman and Siporin (2008) recognize the use of sitting meditation as well as the application of mindful awareness in everyday activities. Greco and Haves (2008) specifically look at the use of mindfulness in children's therapy to reduce anxiety. Mindfulness can also be used as a coping mechanism when faced with emotional distress or pain (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). There are many methods of meditation: breathing exercises, yoga, and guided meditations (Carson & Larkin, 2009). Overall, mindfulness can be utilized as a tool for enhanced self-care and professional development.

Mindfulness Practice

As can be seen from the literature, mindfulness can be a creative resource to benefit professionals, students, and clients. There is an assortment of different contexts in which mindfulness has been shown to make a significant impact in learners. For example, Mensinga argues that yoga is one way for us to be mindful. According to Mensinga (pp. 650), "the body is the main channel for influencing the mind." As such, we need to be aware of our bodies so that we can be aware of our mind. As we are comfortable and calm within our bodies, we will enhance our abilities to problem solve.

> "Yoga practitioners understand that the more familiar they are with their own body and embodied responses, the more likely they are to make an informed choice as to how to react in any given situation… mindfulness and mindfulness meditation can be used as effective tools for developing self-observation and awareness in the learning process" (Mensinga, pp. 657).

Brantley (2007) has used mindfulness in order to calm anxiety, fear, and panic. This method can be useful for clients with various anxiety disorders. He specifically encourages clients to use meditation to make themselves more aware of their sensations so that they can begin to control them.

> As you approach life this way, being more sensitive to the details of daily experience, paying attention on purpose, you are training your mind to be present. You are awakening to the experience of living fully. You begin to discover the spaciousness and stillness that is inside. This spaciousness can begin to support you. It is there for you in managing fear, panic, and anxiety. It will be there for other demanding visitors like anger, grief, or despair, as well. And it will be there for the joys of life, too (pp. 103).

In a study of mindfulness meditation, researchers Carlson and Larkin (2009) found that meditation can be used to decrease stress in recovering addicts. "Meditation cultivates awareness of the moment and teaches its practitioners to witness the constantly shifting stream of inner and outer experiences without getting caught up in them" (Carlson & Larkin, pp. 383-384). They note that "although substance abuse may initially be a coping strategy to deal with the stress of adverse childhood experiences, over time chronic substance use and its consequences can lead to further stress" (Carlson & Larkin, pp. 382). Although meditation doesn't produce the level of euphoria, or "high" that drug addicts are seeking, it does give them an awareness and control that helps them feel whole and relaxed. Addicts can use meditation to respond to high-risk situations and weaken their cravings so that they are less likely to experience a relapse (Carlson & Larkin, 2008). The same mindfulness methods utilized with clients can also be effective with social workers and students developing their professional skills.

Mindfulness has also been used in schools to encourage self-regulation, emotional coping, and self-esteem in adolescents (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010). In an example of a school-based intervention, researchers using meditation found that the benefits of mindfulness go beyond just awareness and increased understanding of self. Cognitively, mindfulness enhanced students' "ability to pay attention, improve concentration, and decrease anxiety" (pp. 150). Medically, meditation showed "decreases in blood pressure and heart rate [and] improvements in sleep behavior" (pp. 152). It was also able to enhance relationships, assist students with learning problems, and increase self-regulation. In particular, when working with adolescents, meditation can be used to help them regulate their emotions and behavior so they can overcome their daily challenges. This study not only demonstrates that mindfulness can be effective when working with youth, but it can also be effective in nearly all realms of our lives.

Coholic (2011) used an arts-based mindfulness technique to increase resilience and self-awareness for youth placed in mental health or child protection systems. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, "mindfulness has everything to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating appreciation for the fullness of each of life's moments" (Coholic, pp. 303-304). From this perspective, we can see why mindfulness techniques would be useful for youth that are struggling with identity and lack coping skills. The participants in Coholic's study showed self-blame, low self-confidence, and a tendency to be angry or aggressive. The researchers used arts-based mindfulness activities to "teach the children how to pay attention; use their imaginations; identify and explore their feelings, thoughts and behaviors; and develop their strengths" (Coholic, pp. 308). After completing the mindfulness intervention, parents of the participants noticed that the children experienced a growth in self-

esteem, self-awareness, and greater comfort with themselves. Social work students and professionals need to understand the importance of mindfulness for themselves and for clients.

Mindfulness can also be used in leadership skills training. In their book, Boyatzis and McKee (2005) describe how mindfulness skills can be utilized by leaders in times of stress. Leadership is not always easy, and if leaders are more mindful they can be more aware of how to best support their constituents. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) inform us that effective leadership requires self-control, or, "placing the good of the organization above personal impulses and needs" (pp. 206). Mindfulness can assist in self-control because it allows us to focus on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. As students and professionals are aware of their thoughts, feelings, and actions, they can become more skilled at exercising self-control, and consequently, providing more effective leadership.

Mindfulness in Social Work

Social Work and Burnout

Mindfulness is an important skill for social workers because of the possible risks for burnout. "Burnout refers to a cluster of physical, emotional, and interactional symptoms related to job stress and includes emotional exhaustion, a sense of lacking personal accomplishment, and depersonalization of clients (Arches, pp. 202). Gillespie (1986) informs us that "complex phenomena like burnout require theory to be understood" (pp. 4). In social work, theory always informs practice. Part of practical application of theory is to measure the problem. There are several scales that have been developed to measure burnout, and one of the most commonly used scales is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1986). The MBI uses

surveys to measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Inventories such as the MBI are useful assessment tools.

There are also a variety of speculations as to the cause of burnout. Arches (1991) notes that burnout in the social work profession is due less to individual characteristics, and more to the bureaucratic structure of social work programs. This author suggests that social workers are more likely to be satisfied within their jobs if they feel that they have control and autonomy within their organizational structure. Even though social workers often work in bureaucratic structures, mindfulness can improve working conditions because it allows them to be within the present moment without judging or criticizing themselves or the experience. By using mindfulness we can make the most of our work environment, regardless of the restrictions or structure of the programs and facilities we work in.

A study by Jayaratne and Chess (1964) looked at how self-reported job perception affects burnout and stress within various social work services. They found that job environment, frequency of moral dilemmas at work, and role ambiguity all had an impact on performance and turnover. In sum, the researchers note that child welfare workers experienced higher levels of stress than their colleagues in other fields. Because so many social workers have careers in the field of child welfare, they are in particular need of developing mindfulness skills.

Another early discussion on burnout in the helping professions by Ratliff (1988) discussed that burnout is prominently found in the helping professions because it is difficult to accomplish therapeutic success. Ratliff also references that “people who are drawn to the human service field tend to be sensitive to others, humanitarian, and sympathetic, and they wish to be helpful” (pp. 149). Pines, Aronson, and Kafry (1981) note that human service workers tend to have a client-centered orientation and that makes “the process of burnout almost inevitable” (pp.

54). Being mindful of client situations in practice can help social workers to not judge themselves based on client success. Instead, the focus is on the facilitation of progress rather than success. The use of mindfulness gives focus to the therapeutic process.

The effects of burnout at work impact other aspects of the worker's life. Pasupuleti, Allen, Lambert, and Cluse-Tolar (2009) researched how life satisfaction was affected by work stressors in social workers. Life satisfaction is an important part of the self. They note that for many, a job can become an avenue of self-fulfillment, and it often becomes a part one's sense of self. Dissatisfaction effects self-concept and use of self for those with social service careers (Pasupuleti et al, 2009). Use of self is crucial to be effective with clients. Mindfulness can be a powerful tool for utilizing our use of self and adequately helping clients.

In order to prevent burnout, social workers have used a variety of techniques, one of them being mindfulness. The need for mindfulness techniques is implied within the Social Work Code of Ethics, which suggests that social workers develop self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-care skills (McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011). It was also suggested by participants in the study that mindfulness is a skill and must be worked on consistently and continually (McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011).

Mindfulness and Ethical Decision Making

Ruedy and Schweitzer (2010) discovered that those who used mindfulness techniques were more likely to make honest and ethical decisions because it increases one's ability to be aware of both intern and external influences. Practicing mindfulness helps social workers to be more aware of how behavior impacts the environment, one's thought processes, and one's values. Mindfulness helps one to establish self-control which influences ethical behavior because

of the focus on the present moment (Ruedy and Schweitzer, 2010). Much of mindfulness revolves around the concept of living within the present moment so we can accept things as they are. As we fully experience the present moment, this theory suggests that we develop greater self-control and are able to make grounded and future-oriented decisions. The present moment helps social workers to jump out of autopilot and be engaged in the work at hand (Hick, 2009).

Mindfulness for Students of Social Work

In relation to social work education, Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, and Metrey (2002) measured self-efficacy of social work students in order to assess their confidence in social work tasks. They found that self-efficacy of youth was able to predict the self-efficacy in career-related behaviors (Holden et al, 2002). Mindfulness can facilitate awareness of skills which contributes to self-confidence. Birnbaum (2005) performed a study in which she trained social work students to use mindfulness meditation to increase self-awareness. “This entails an ongoing focus on workers’ self-awareness” (Birnbaum, p. 1). The goal of the study was to analyze the impact of short-term and long-term meditation on professional development. Although Birnbaum’s study was exploratory in nature, the participants in the study demonstrated many insights regarding their own feelings and how they express themselves.

In conclusion, the literature is replete with examples of how mindfulness influences self-efficacy, professional behavior, and self-care practices. It is important that students in the practicum have opportunities to develop the skills of mindfulness. This in turn, can ideally assist in improving professional self-efficacy, increasing positive self-esteem and professionalism, and diminish perceptions of work-related stress.

Methods

The Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how mindfulness techniques affect practicum students' perception of professional development, stress, and support. The hypothesis is that students that are trained in mindfulness within the context of the practicum seminar will improve their professional development especially in reference to: 1) improving professional self-efficacy, 2) increasing positive self-esteem and how they regard themselves professionally, and 3) perceiving less work-related stress. This hypothesis relates to the assumption made by Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, and Metrey (2002): which theorizes that students who participate in mindfulness exercises will be more aware of their professional skills and be more likely to be confident in these skills.

The research conducted on mindfulness techniques involved the implementation of techniques within the practicum seminar. Through this implementation, the following research questions were the focus: do mindfulness techniques assist students in their professional development? As well as, are mindfulness techniques helpful in reducing the stress of multiple demands of the practicum?

Study Design

The methods for this research include: exposure, intervention, testing, and enhancement. Throughout the study students read articles, learned techniques, and gained an understanding of how mindfulness can be used in diverse ways. Participants were tested using a time-series ABC research design, that is, participants were tested three different times. Each stage of testing took place between the aforementioned phases.

Exposure

Before any testing began, participants were exposed to the use of mindfulness through a lecture on the definition and a demonstration of a single technique. The technique for initial exposure was derived from McKay, Wood, and Brantley (2007) which called for the focus on a single object. Students spent several minutes focusing on an object of their choice. Students were asked to try and block out the distractions within the room that were not related to their object, and think about the qualities and characteristics of that object. Afterwards, a discussion took place on how the experience felt for them.

Enhancement

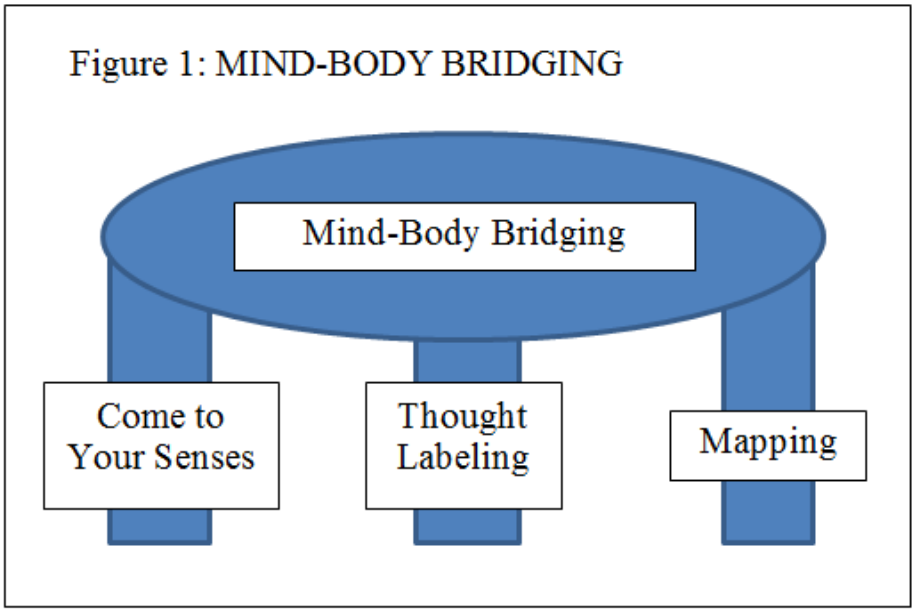
Between the testing sessions A and B, participants' mindfulness was enhanced through continued readings, in-class discussions, and workshops. The discussions and workshops focused on thought diffusion, stress management, and "centering" or "getting clear". In the workshop about thought diffusion, the goal was for students to "recognize and focus on [their] thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations" (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, pp. 73). As part of this activity, participants were instructed to take some slow, relaxed breaths, creatively watch their thoughts arise and disappear, return to their use of relaxed breathing, then return their focus to the room. The purpose of the enhancement stage was to expand the participants' understanding of mindfulness and how it could be effective for them in a personal way.

Intervention

It was also between sessions A and B that students received an intervention on mindfulness taught by Dr. Derrik Tollefson. Dr. Tollefson discussed mind-body bridging. Mind-

body bridging is when we become more aware of how our brain habitually reacts, and then change the course of our thoughts. For example, most of the time we react using our limbic system; however, as mindfulness assists us in becoming more aware of our thoughts, we gravitate towards using our frontal cortex. As was mentioned previously from Hick's (2009) research, gravitating towards a state of auto-pilot, or as Dr. Tollefson refers to it, "checking out", we become prone to negative thought and impulsive reactions. One of the first steps of mindfulness is to become aware of when we "check out" or lose focus on the present moment. This greater awareness assists students in recognizing their identity system, or the part of the brain that triggers the default network – in other words, the sense that one has "checked out".

Dr. Tollefson also introduced the students to the concept of mind-body bridging. There are three aspects of mind-body bridging: coming to our senses, thought labeling, and mapping [See Figure 1]. Coming to your senses involves being aware of what is around you, or the process just described of recognizing when we have "checked out". As students become aware, they begin to label their thoughts. However, thoughts are not good or bad, they are just thoughts.



When students label them, they force their thoughts into either their identity system or a mindful state. The last leg of mind-body bridging is mapping: putting down thoughts (whatever they may be) on paper and seeing them for what they are.

After Dr. Tollefson's intervention, students received additional mindfulness assignments and classroom instruction so that they could enhance their understanding of mindfulness at home and in their practicum. They were encouraged to use all of the methods they had been taught throughout the first part of the course.

Enhancement

The second semester had another session of enhancements. Early in the semester, participants were asked to participate in an online discussion. This discussion is similar to the one they participated in during the first semester: the students read several articles about mindfulness, wrote about them, and responded to their classmates' responses.

Then, just a few weeks before the final test, the participants were taught a few new techniques and given various mindfulness exercises to practice at home. As Hick stated in his article, "[Mindfulness] is a journey that is cultivated through sustained practice rather than absorbed from a book—although books can help. So while [learning exercises] may be helpful for formulating mindfulness and its uses for social work, ultimately you may need to sit quietly and breathe and perhaps engage in some of the exercises" (Hick, pp. 2). The researchers introduced students to a broad repertoire of mindfulness activities so they could find the technique that was most beneficial for them. Students were encouraged to practice at least one of these techniques as much as possible throughout the last three weeks of the study.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected from the senior class of social work students at Utah State University. This sample was chosen because each had been placed in a practicum internship for the duration of their senior year. Each student was given an informed consent [see Appendix A] and informed of the risks and benefits of the study. The sample consisted of two groups in separate practicum seminars with a total N = 48; 5 males, and 43 females. Every member of each group participated in the design discussed above.

Instrument

After the initial stage of exposure, students were given a pre-test to gauge their personal use of mindfulness within the practicum, their social environment, and school [see Appendix B]. Jordan and Kelly (2011) note that students near the beginning of their clinical experiences tend to have worries within three categories: competence, supervision, and preparation. The pre-test not only related to these categories, but the researchers hypothesized that the use of mindfulness might help to eliminate these worries. When attempting to measure burnout, some of the questions provided on the pre-test and post-test were informed by Maslach's MBI (1986) scaling questions and topics of interest, although the exact mechanisms were not used.

Participants were asked to take a qualitative mid-test [See Appendix C] at the end of the first semester of the practicum seminar. This mid-test had similar topics as the pre-test, but asked for a description of each rating so the researchers could better understand how mindfulness trainings had been effective thus far. The mid-test qualitative responses were used to develop the remaining enhancement.

Later on in the second semester, participants were asked to take a post-test that was similar to the pre-test taken several months before [See Appendix D]. The results of these tests are discussed within the results section. Within the same semester, a qualitative post-test was also used [See Appendix E] to glean a better understanding of how to improve the intervention in future studies.

Limitations

One of our limitations was in the nature of the study design. The study was an exploratory study of two groups of students and their use of mindfulness. Although we performed a time-series ABC design, the two groups received the all interventions at the same time, and as such, the results cannot be generalized beyond our study. The researchers have plans to replicate the study with a control group to make it more generalizable.

Another limitation of our study is in reference to one of our findings. Our results seem to show that the same number of students increased their use of mindfulness as the number of students that decreased their use of mindfulness. The researchers feel that this limitation can partially be attributed to the natural processes of the internship. The students that increased their use of mindfulness perhaps recognized their need for self-care practices within their practicum placement. However, the students that decreased their use of mindfulness could be associated with a perception of a commitment to practice self-care. Many times, students, and even professionals, get so over-burdened with tasks that distract from the time for self-care practices. One of the important facets of mindfulness is that it is an intentional skill – we need to recognize when to practice it and take the time to do so.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data was collected primarily through the use of pre-, mid-, and post-tests [See Appendices B, C, D, and E]. Each of the questions within the pre- and post- test were statistically analyzed using a series of Pearson chi-squares for each variable [See Table 1]. The qualitative mid-test was assessed for popular themes which guided the later portions of the study. Similar to the mid-test, the qualitative post-test will be used to improve and replicate the study for other students.

Results

Generally, results seem to show that students were willing to use mindfulness once they learned about it. Results also seem to show that students that increased their use of mindfulness throughout the study were better able to balance multiple demands and as such, perceived less stress.

Table 1: PEARSON CHI-SQUARES FROM PRE-TEST TO POST-TEST

	χ^2	df	p
Time Using Mindfulness	52.28	16	<0.5
Mindfulness Technique Used	76.60	48	<0.5
Perception of Practicum Support	21.84	9	<0.5
Perception of Outside Support	37.68	12	<0.5
Prone to Negative Thinking	23.16	12	<0.5
Negative thinking in Relation to Multiple Demands	51.10	16	<0.5
Increase and Decrease of Mindfulness Use	49.10	16	<0.5
Mindfulness and Multiple Demands	33.40	16	<0.5

The statistical findings from this analysis seem to show us several things. First, students spent more time using mindfulness at the post-test than at the pre-test [Refer to Table 1]. We assume that this association is related to the exposure, intervention, and enhancement phases

described previously. Throughout the study, students also changed their mind as to which mindfulness technique was most useful for them [Refer to Table 1]. On the post-test, their responses gravitated towards the use of meditation, relaxed breathing, and refocusing thoughts. These are the techniques that were introduced to them throughout the study.

When asked about the support within their practicum and outside sources, students experienced a positive change in their practicum support, but their other support sources slightly reduced [Refer to Table 1]. We could attribute these changes to the process of internship development and the need to utilize a variety of other support sources. Next, participants reported being more prone to negative thinking, and they also had negative thinking in reference to their multiple demands [Refer to Table 1]. Generally, as the internship progresses in demands and responsibilities, stress also increases. Lastly, our results showed us that about an equal number of students exercised mindfulness techniques less at post-test than they did at the pre-test, and more at the pre-test than at the post-test [Refer to Table 1]. In other words, the number of students who *decreased* their use of mindfulness from pre-test to post-test was nearly the same as the number of students who *increased* their use of mindfulness from pre-test to post-test. There are a variety of possible reasons for this decrease including interest in the use of mindfulness for stress reduction, time constraints, commitment to self-care, and the impact of multiple demands.

The variables were also tested to see if the use of mindfulness was associated with any of the outcomes. The questions related to “time spent using mindfulness” and “types of mindfulness technique used most frequently” were considered as the independent variables. Results seem to show that participants who spent more time using mindfulness techniques were less bothered by multiple demands [Refer to Table 1]. It seems there may be an association with the use of mindfulness and the ability to handle multiple demands.

When analyzing the results from the mid-test, the researchers found three general themes within the responses. The first theme indicated that students would practice mindfulness if they had more time. We focused on this theme to design the last enhancement session. Demonstrations of simple mindfulness techniques were shared that require very little time. Just as in the study performed by McGarrigle and Walsh (2011), the researchers demonstrated that most mindfulness methods do not require a large *time* commitment, but it does require a *consistent* commitment to prove useful.

Another general theme found within the mid-test responses was that students experience multiple stressors associated with practicum and other life demands. This factor could be associated with the increase in responsibilities and the demands of the practicum over time.

The third theme we found was that students found breathing exercises to be the most favorable technique to cope with stress. This was one of the first exercises we taught within the seminar, and it is also one of the simplest techniques to teach and practice. Each of these themes share important insights about students and their use of mindfulness.

Discussion

Findings show that in some cases students increased their use of mindfulness, particularly with specific mindfulness skills such as mindful breathing, that were introduced to them throughout the study. Generally speaking, as students were instructed on the purpose and applicability of mindfulness, they were more likely to practice mindfulness on their own. Essentially, it is challenging to practice skills with no understanding. Introducing these concepts and skills allowed for students to develop mindfulness skills that might help them handle their multiple demands.

As was briefly mentioned, the changes in perceived support within the practicum can be attributed to the developmental process of the internship. As students take on new roles, they go through phases – initially they may experience anxiety or distress, but as they adapt to new roles, they learn how to better collaborate with supervisors, how to take on new assignments, and how to follow through with those assignments. Recognizing that the developmental process within the internship is natural, being mindful of this process can assist students through each phase and impact competence levels. Mindfulness encourages students to be aware of senses, responses, and surroundings, which may reduce the anxiety that comes from new roles.

It is unclear as to why throughout the study students become more prone to negative thinking, especially about their multiple demands. Perhaps this negative thinking is a natural byproduct of the multiple roles in which the participants are faced with and the inability to completely dedicate their undivided time to those roles.

Professional self-care, including mindfulness, is an essential underpinning to best practice of social work. On some level, professionals have to decide to make self-care a priority in order for it to be effective. All self-care practices must be considered as an intentional skill if they are to be used efficiently.

The last finding presents us with great optimism. The participants that increased their use of mindfulness also became less bothered by multiple demands. Between being a student, an intern, a family member, an employee, and a roommate or partner, students within the practicum have many roles to fulfill. Trying to juggle these roles can be difficult for many of the students, and so it is encouraging to see the association between mindfulness use and ability to balance multiple demands. In a study conducted by Pasupuleti, Allen, Lambert, and Cluse-Tolar (2009) they indicate that job satisfaction is often related to life satisfaction. As students practice

mindfulness effectively, they can learn to focus on the present moment and learn to manage the stress presented by multiple role demands.

The study seems to indicate that mindfulness could be effective in reducing the perception of stress and the ability to balance multiple demands. Future studies will be conducted on utilizing the skills of mindfulness in the context of the practicum.

Conclusion

Mindfulness can be a creative and applicable tool for all those willing to practice it. Whether it be through yoga, meditation, re-focusing thoughts, exercising, breathing, or creating art projects, mindfulness can affect our stress levels and our ability to balance the many demands we face in life. Specifically, mindfulness can be used by social workers to help prevent burnout and lower work-related stress. It can also be used by students who are entering the social service field. Students in this study were introduced to mindfulness and given several skills to practice, and findings show that many of the students used mindfulness at various levels to try and balance multiple demands. Mindfulness can be effective in our lives if we choose to practice it in a way that is applicable to us. So, take the time to breathe in… breathe out… and visualize how to apply mindfulness in a way that is helpful to you.

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INFORMED CONSENT

Utilizing Mindfulness in the Social Work Practicum

Introduction/Purpose Professor Diane Calloway-Graham, Professor Moises Diaz, and Student Allison Leonard in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology at Utah State University are conducting a research study to find out more about the use of mindfulness in the social work undergraduate practicum. You have been asked to take part because you are taking Social Work 4870 and have been placed in a practicum. There will be approximately 45 total participants in this research.

Procedures If you agree to be in this research study, the following will happen to you. During Fall Semester and again in Spring Semester, you will be asked to participate in mindfulness exercises and to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the semester. The mindfulness exercises are a part of the regular class activities and you will be expected to participate in them regardless of whether you agree to participate in the research. On the pre- and post-surveys, you will be asked to rate your use of mindfulness and it's helpfulness as you progressed through your practicum. These ratings will NOT affect your grade in the practicum.

Risks Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts, however, the risks are no greater than what you might experience in everyday activities. There is a risk of loss of confidentiality, but we will take steps to prevent that as described below. If you feel you have been harmed as a result of participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Calloway-Graham at 435-797-2389, Dr. Diaz at 435-797-8258, or Allison Leonard at 801-721-8427. If you feel uncomfortable talking to either of these persons, you may also contact Dr. Terry Peak at 435-797-4080.

Benefits There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. The investigators, however, may learn more about how students can benefit from the use of mindfulness within the practicum setting. Individuals who utilize the mindfulness techniques in their practicum as a part of this study may further benefit by continuing to utilize the techniques throughout their social work profession.

Explanation & offer to answer questions Allison Leonard, Dr. Diane Calloway-Graham, or Dr. Moises Diaz has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach Allison Leonard at 801-721-8427, Dr. Calloway-Graham at 797-2389, or Dr. Moises Diaz at 435-8258.

Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without any negative consequences or loss of benefits. In no way will your decision to participate affect your grade for Social Work 4870 or any other social work class you may take in the future. **If you do not wish to participate, please complete the section on page 2 of this document and return it to Dr. Calloway-Graham or Allison Leonard.** You will still be required to attend class and do all homework assignments assigned by your class instructor.

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INFORMED CONSENT
Utilizing Mindfulness in the Social Work Practicum

Confidentiality Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the investigators will have access to all the data, which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked room. Names will be removed from all study documents and replaced with a Study ID number. A list that links student names and Study ID's will be stored separately from study data in a locked cabinet. Personal, identifiable information will be kept until all data have been collected. After data have been entered, the questionnaires and surveys will be destroyed. This process is being done to protect your privacy. Please note that study records may be reviewed by Utah State's Institutional Review Board to ensure that your rights as a participant are being protected.

IRB Approval Statement The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu. If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

Investigator Statement "I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered."

Signature of PI, Co-PI, & Student Researcher

_____
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INFORMED CONSENT
Utilizing Mindfulness in the Social Work Practicum

Decline Participation I do not wish to participate in this research study. I understand that I will be required to participate in class activities and assignments but will not complete the pre- and post-tests.

_____ _____
Student's signature Date

_____
Name (Please Print)

MINDFULNESS PRE-TEST

1. With your current perception of your practicum, on a scale of 1 to 5, how stressful do you perceive your practicum to be? *(1 being very low stress, and 5 being very high stress)*
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Please rate your perceived strength of support system within your practicum (i.e. faculty supervisors, agency supervisors, co-workers, etc.). *(1 being very little support, and 5 being very high support)*
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Please rate your perceived strength of support system *outside* your practicum (family, friends, classmates, roommates, etc.) *(1 being very little support, and 5 being very high support)*
   1 2 3 4 5

4. With your current perception of your senior year, on a scale of 1 to 5, how stressful do you perceive your senior year to be? *(1 being very low stress, and 5 being very high stress)*
   1 2 3 4 5

5. Please rate your overall self-esteem: *(1 being very low self-esteem, and 5 being very high self-esteem)*
   1 2 3 4 5

6. What aware do you consider yourself of your body, thoughts, and emotions in reaction to stress. *(1 being unaware, and 5 being very aware)*
   1 2 3 4 5

7. How many times a week do you currently utilize mindfulness techniques? (i.e. meditation, relaxed breathing, re-focusing thoughts, doing tasks mindfully, etc.)
   a. 10+
   b. 6-10
   c. 3-5
   d. 1-2
   e. 0

8. What do you feel is the most effective mindfulness technique for you?
   a. Meditation
   b. Relaxed breathing
   c. Re-focusing thoughts
   d. Doing tasks mindfully
   e. Visualizations
   f. Journaling
   g. Music
   h. Exercise
   i. Other (please specify) _____

The following scale will be used for the next four questions.

1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
A few times a Year	**Once a Month**	**Once a Week**	**A few times a Week**	**Everyday**

9. How often do you feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy?
   1 2 3 4 5

10. How often do you find yourself prone towards negative thinking in reference to your multiple demands (i.e. practicum, classes, work, relationships, etc.)
    1 2 3 4 5

11. How often do you find yourself frustrated by multiple demands?
    1 2 3 4 5

12. How often do you exercise?
    1 2 3 4 5

13. How interested are you in learning new mindfulness techniques in order to help you prevent burnout in your practicum and as a Social Work professional? *(1 being very uninterested, and 5 being very interested)*
    1 2 3 4 5

14. Please rate your overall knowledge and understanding of mindfulness. *(1 being very little knowledge, and 5 being very knowledgeable)*
    1 2 3 4 5

15. If you knew more, how likely would you be to use mindfulness techniques? *(1 being not at all likely, and 5 being very likely)*
    1 2 3 4 5

MINDFULNESS MID-TEST

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 *(1 being very low stress, and 5 being very high stress*), how would you rate your stress over the Fall semester?

   1 2 3 4 5

   Please describe your rating and briefly describe your stress:

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 *(1 being very few times and 5 being very often)*, how much have you utilized mindfulness to cope with stress?

   1 2 3 4 5

   Please describe your rating and expand on your use of mindfulness to reduce stress:

3. On a scale of 1 to 5 *(1 being not very helpful and 5 being very helpful),* have the techniques of mindfulness taught in seminar been useful in expanding your knowledge and skill?

   1 2 3 4 5

   Please describe your rating and describe how your knowledge of mindfulness has expanded. Also, explain the specific skills you have implemented as a result:

4. On a scale of 1 to 5 *(1 being low and 5 being high),* how has the seminar and field work impacted your self-esteem and professional competence?

   1 2 3 4 5

   Please expound on your perceived improvements in self-esteem and professional competence:

MINDFULNESS POST-TEST

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how stressful has your practicum been? *(1 being very low stress, and 5 being very high stress)*
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Please rate your perceived strength of support system within your practicum (i.e. faculty supervisors, agency supervisors, co-workers, etc.). *(1 being very little support, and 5 being very high support)*
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Please rate your perceived strength of support system *outside* your practicum (family, friends, classmates, roommates, etc.) *(1 being very little support, and 5 being very high support)*
   1 2 3 4 5

4. On a scale of 1 to 5, how stressful has your senior year been? *(1 being very low stress, and 5 being very high stress)*
   1 2 3 4 5

5. Please rate your overall self-esteem: *(1 being very low self-esteem, and 5 being very high self-esteem)*
   1 2 3 4 5

6. How aware do you consider yourself of your body, thoughts, and emotions in reaction to stress? *(1 being unaware, and 5 being very aware)*
   1 2 3 4 5

7. How many times a week do you currently utilize mindfulness techniques? (i.e. meditation, relaxed breathing, re-focusing thoughts, doing tasks mindfully, etc.)
   a. 10+
   b. 6-10
   c. 3-5
   d. 1-2
   e. 0

8. What do you feel is the most effective mindfulness technique for you? (Please pick ONE)
   a. Meditation
   b. Relaxed breathing
   c. Re-focusing thoughts
   d. Doing tasks mindfully
   e. Visualizations
   f. Journaling
   g. Music
   h. Exercise
   i. Other (please specify) _____

The following scale will be used for the next four questions.

1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
A few times a Year	**Once a Month**	**Once a Week**	**A few times a Week**	**Everyday**

9. How often do you feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy?
   1 2 3 4 5

10. How often do you find yourself prone towards negative thinking in reference to your multiple demands (i.e. practicum, classes, work, relationships, etc.)
    1 2 3 4 5

11. How often do you find yourself frustrated by multiple demands?
    1 2 3 4 5

12. How often do you exercise?
    1 2 3 4 5

13. How effective have the mindfulness techniques taught in class been in helping you prevent burnout in your practicum and as a Social Work professional? *(1 being not very helpful, and 5 being very helpful)*
    1 2 3 4 5

14. Please rate your overall knowledge and understanding of mindfulness. *(1 being very little knowledge, and 5 being very knowledgeable)*
    1 2 3 4 5

15. Now that you are aware of different mindfulness techniques, how likely are you to use them? *(1 being not at all likely, and 5 being very likely)*
    1 2 3 4 5

FINAL MINDFULNESS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Have you managed your stress more effectively this semester?
   Yes Sometimes No

   a. How have you managed your stress more effectively?

   b. How could you manage your stress more effectively?

2. How often have you used mindfulness to cope with stress?

3. How has the seminar helped you to expand your knowledge and skill in utilizing mindfulness?

4. Please describe your perceived improvements in self-esteem and professional competence as a result of using mindfulness.

Author's Biography

Allison Leigh Leonard was born in Farmington, Utah and was raised close to her family and friends. She always sought for a superior education, and she excelled in all of her academic aspirations. She participated in the National Honors Society, and during her senior year of high school she was sworn in as one of the officers. Allison graduated with High Honors from Davis High School in 2008.

Allison is a graduate of the Social Work program at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, with a minor in Family and Human Development. Allison has always enjoyed assisting others, and has found social work to be a rewarding profession where she can utilize her skills of compassion, empathy, and hard work. She was able to practice these skills in a practicum at Child and Family Support Center throughout her senior year. This research on mindfulness helped embellish upon the skills she already had and prepared her for the experiences she will have as a social worker.

Her yearning for education continues: Allison plans to attend graduate school at Boston University and receive her Masters in Social Work. She aspires to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker so that she can provide therapy and potentially manage her own practice. Allison loves education, and looks forward to being a mentor to others within the field of Social Work.