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THE ROLE AND EFFECT OF MINDFULNESS IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

A dissertation presented to the faculty of

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY, SANTA BARBARA

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

in

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

By

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December 2019

THE ROLE AND EFFECT OF MINDFULNESS IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Mindfulness practice, a present-centered approach to experience, has been shown to effectively enhance various dimensions of the human experience. Recent literature has explored how the practice of mindfulness meditation has provided benefits to practitioners seeking to enhance relationship dynamics. There are multiple examples of mindfulness-based relationship enhancement programs aiming to enhance the quality of intimate relationships in adults. This study utilizes a repeated-measures design to address whether a neutral mindfulness-based program, not geared at enhancing relationships, can significantly alter the quality of intimate relationships. The research will further examine the central mechanisms of action through which mindfulness can enhance relationships. Emotional regulation and conflict resolution, two critical constructs that are central to developing and maintaining intimate relationships, are thoroughly explored within the context of mindfulness practice. This Dissertation is available in Open Access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, <http://aura.antioch.edu> and OhioLink ETD Center, <http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd>

Keywords: mindfulness, relationships, meditation, emotion regulation, communication

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Chapter I: Introduction

Mindfulness, a practice based on active engagement with the present experience and marked by heightened awareness, has gained considerable attention from the research community in the past decade (Burpee & Langer, 2005). Mindfulness denotes a non-deliberate approach towards examining internal and external experiences through a lens of impartial observation, which is characterized by acceptance, curiosity, and openness (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). This is a two-fold operational definition presented across the literature that involves both the attention to experience, paired with an orientation through which one integrates the present moment. It is a challenge to operationally define mindfulness as a construct since there are multiple ways of approaching, understanding, and implementing a mindfulness-based intervention (Greenberg & Meiran, 2014). Considerable amounts of research has consistently shown the effectiveness of mindfulness in a number of domains such as attention, relationships, and overall well-being (Carson, et al., 2004). The practice is considered to have ancient roots and has only recently become a popular topic of interest in the scientific community.

The origins of mindfulness practice could be traced back to the development of basic Buddhist principles. Mikulus (2010) argues the Buddha's teachings set forth the basis of mindfulness-based psychology since it succinctly addresses the nature of sensation, perception, emotion, motivation, cognition, mind, and consciousness. The ultimate function of these Buddhist practices is awakening of attention through disciplined concentrated practice. Alexander et. al (1989) noted that William James, one of the greatest American Psychologists of the early 20th century, was one of the first to point towards the power of heightened states of

awareness. James argued that such states of enhanced awareness could be attained through disciplined practice which could have pervasive influence on thought and behavior. James suggested that one way to cultivate such exceptional levels of awareness could be through the utilization of ancient Indian practices (Alexander et. al, 1989). Over time these practices evolved to be quantified within the empirical western medical model. Through this shift, mindfulness became one of the practices that started being utilized for stress reduction and general life enhancement. The quantitative method however extracted mindfulness from its religious context in order to apply the technique in a specific scientific way that is rooted in quantifiable statistics (Mikulas, 2010).

One of the major contributors to this recontextualization of mindfulness within the western medical model is John Kabat-Zinn. “Buddhist meditation techniques were originally adapted by Jon Kabat-Zinn, founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School” (Young, 2011). In 1985 John Kabat-Zinn ran one of the first significant studies on mindfulness by utilizing the practice as a means for treating chronic pain. Essentially, ninety patients with chronic pain enrolled in a ten-week guided mindfulness-based relaxation group. Utilizing a pre-test post-test design, the researchers found statistically significant changes in relation to pain perception, mood disturbance, psychological well-being, body image, anxiety, and depression (Kabat-Zinn et. al, 1985). This study in part set-forth the basis for future studies and ignited the research momentum around mindfulness-based practices. Since then, many studies have not only corroborated these initial findings, but have gone on to reflect neurological underpinnings for the perceived changes as a result of mindfulness practice.

A study by Brewer et. al (2011) utilized brain imaging techniques to better understand how the biological brain is affected by meditation. What they found was that the anterior cingulate, prefrontal cortex, default mode network, and grey matter density had all been augmented as a result of meditative practices. These areas are known to affect general cognitive control, concentration, affect regulation, mind-wandering, and many other important cognitive functions (Brewer et. al, 2011). Other researchers have found that mindfulness practice effectively modulates the 5-HT serotonin receptors, involved in mood regulation, in the brain and can prevent the relapse of depression in vulnerable populations (Young, 2011). Experienced meditators have also been associated with having higher base line alpha and theta brain wave levels, which typically are reflective of relaxation states (Davidson, et. al, 2003). Davidson and Colleagues went on to also find significant changes in immune functioning as a result of mindfulness-based stress-reduction practices. There are thousands of other articles that report on the significant neurological and phenomenological changes that seem to be correlated to mindfulness meditation.

In addition to positive changes in individual cognition, mindfulness has proven to be quite helpful in enhancing one's ability to initiate and maintain healthy relationships with intimate attachment figures (Atkinson, 2013). Stanley (2013) argues that mindfulness, within the context of the western medical model, has become objectified as a practice that is occupied with the individual's subjective well-being, which has taken a central role in the presented research. Stanley proposes that mindfulness should be explored from a relational perspective in which the benefits of the practice are perceived as a potential social resource for individuals and groups to enhance their relationships within the larger social microcosm (Stanley, 2012). In other words, mindfulness is not just a practice involved with cultivating a healthier individual, but is also a

tool for fostering greater social cohesion and connection. Meditation, since it's perceived as an isolating practice, had not initially received much attention in terms of its potential to positively enhance relationships. However, recent research has found that mindfulness can be a significant tool in enhancing personal relationships and has been shown to assist in strengthening the mother-infant attachment from an object-relations perspective (Snyder, 2012).

Snyder (2012) states that the very cultivation of awareness, mindful responsiveness, and heightened self-awareness is sufficient to create the conditions for healthier attachments to intimate relational figures. Siegel (2007) further substantiates the mechanisms through which this securing of relationships occurs. He argues that mindfulness practice creates a secure attachment with one's own sense of self, which then fosters the ability to create a secure connection with attachment figures, and that this heightened awareness of self and other reinforces attunement and connection (Siegel, 2007). Another significant area of the social mechanisms of mindfulness is empathy. Empathy has been considered to be an important factor in marital satisfaction. Empathic attunement in times of conflict seems to be very important in moderating marital tension and conflict escalation (Atkinson, 2013). Other factors such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and meta-cognition will be further discussed as central mechanisms of action through which relationship enhancement is achieved. In sum, the presented research seeks to go beyond focusing on individual gains by highlighting the relevant relational benefits of mindfulness practice as a means to enhance one's subjective social microcosm and therefore foster greater connection between self and other.

Another interesting area of research that is receiving some significant attention is the utilization of mindfulness techniques to enhance sexual functioning. Sex is considered to be one of the most important factors in maintaining healthy relationships with intimate partners

(McCarthy & Wald, 2013). Brotto (2013) argues that mindfulness techniques are being used in individual and group treatment programs in an attempt to decrease sex-related stress and improve the various dimensions of sexual response. In sum, mindfulness has been shown to positively alter the neurological pathways related to attention, regulation, and subjective well-being. In addition, mindfulness techniques have proven to be very useful in fostering healthy attachments, relationships, and even sexual satisfaction in partners. The presented research seeks to build off of previous research and further highlight the relational utility of mindfulness.

Literature Review

Mindfulness practice has been shown to enhance connection, intimacy, and closeness in relationships by cultivating greater awareness of psycho-affective states of the significant other in the relationship (Barnes, Brown, Krusmark, Campbell, and Rogge, 2007). Jones et. al (2011) notes that mindful attunement to an intimate partner seems to facilitate the expansion of neural networks that are typically associated with safety, security, and positive affect within the romantic relationship, that mindfulness training may have beneficial effects for intimate couples. As demonstrated in the research presented, regulating affect in relationships is one area that mindfulness has proven to be effective in inducing positive change and growth. The focus of this review is to explore the multiple underlying mechanisms of action through which mindfulness augments intimate relationships. By further deconstructing the main mechanisms through which mindfulness affects relationships it is possible to create more effective interventions.

By clearly identifying and illuminating the central mechanisms of action inherent in mindfulness training it may be possible to create more refined approaches to mindfulness-based programs that are more context-specific. This context-specific approach to mindfulness can refine the outcome of interventions that aim to nurture and develop a specific area of functioning. There are multiple mechanisms of action that have been identified which enable the benefits of

mindful awareness. Emotional regulation and conflict resolution are two mechanisms of action that are central to fostering healthy relationships amongst couples and have been shown to be augmented as a result of mindfulness interventions.

The APA website's section on marriage and divorce notes that nearly 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. There seems to be a global trend reflecting increasing rates of divorce cross-culturally. Given this trend, it is critical to understand how to further explore and dissect interventions that seem to be useful in enhancing intimate relationships. There has been a fair amount of research supporting the idea that mindfulness practice enables healthier patterns between partners in intimate relationships (Motley, 1992).

Developing healthier patterns of interaction in couples within the context of mindfulness practice consists of developing better emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and constructive engaged communication. The research is suggesting that mindfulness could prove to be beneficial by facilitating communication styles that are much more conducive to developing healthy romantic relationships (Barnes et al., 2007). A study by Bihari and Mullan (2014) states that participants enrolled in a mindfulness-based therapy program reported that they are relating more mindfully to their own experiences, which has led to influential and profound changes in their relationships with others. Perhaps being able to relate more mindfully towards oneself could have a transient effect in social and intimate connections.

Alongside promoting healthy interaction styles, mindfulness has also been shown to enhance emotional regulation which seems to be a crucial component in relationship development and maintenance (Greenberg & Meiran, 2014). Emotion regulation skills such as the ability to discern and express emotions, empathize, and cope with challenging emotions, are essential to the maintenance of healthy marriages (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). How partners

discern and communicate emotions, deal with their own and their significant others emotions, and generally enact their emotions in relation to intimate partners constitutes an important domain of couple's health (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Identifying emotions and expressing those emotions in intimate relationships is crucial to the well-being of couples. Conversely, when we take the latter proposition into account, lacking the ability to identify and express emotional content could be a major struggle in the maintenance of healthy relationships.

There has been a body of research emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation in intimate relationships and highlighting the ways in which mindfulness has been shown to help facilitate emotional regulation, and therefore enable healthier intimate relationships (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Wachs and Cordova (2007) propose that present-centered attention to the moment is partially characterized by an enhanced ability to tolerate the subjective experience of negative feelings. The reasoning for this increase in emotion tolerance is partially dependent on paying sustained attention to current ongoing experiences, which can put the individual in closer proximity to their own thoughts and feelings, and therefore allow the individual to grow more familiar and comfortable with his or her own emotional experiences (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Additionally, mindfulness practice places the individual in closer proximity to psycho-affective experience, giving greater coherence to emotional processing.

Ultimately, the goal of this review is to provide a theoretical foundation for a mindfulness study which will aim to further illuminate these mechanisms of actions within their respective roles in enhancing relationships. Through this context-specific understanding of the mechanisms of mindfulness, it may be possible to maximize outcome effects of the intervention in relation to the behaviors being targeted. We will now explore the various mechanisms of action within greater detail.

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Engaged communication may not be a single thing but rather the result of multiple other forces working together in a bi-directional cohesive manner (Huston, Garland, & Farb, 2011). By positively influencing various components of interpersonal interaction such as conflict resolution, active listening, and empathy the development of engaged communication may be facilitated (Barnes, et al., 2007). Communication is considered to be a pivotal component in developing and maintaining healthy intimate relationships (Phillips, 1999). Mindfulness has been shown to facilitate a variety of communication skills by positively influencing the practitioner's constructive engagement with interpersonal communication. The study by Barnes et al. (2007) found that individuals with higher mindfulness traits entered a conflict discussion with lower anxiety and anger-hostility, which was related to fewer negative interactions and more positive patterns of communication during the conflict resolution.

Conflict management is considered to be one of the most important aspects of healthy relationship development (Motley, 1992). In this case, the participants of an eight-week mindfulness-based relationship enhancement program found a greater ability to approach conflict resolution more constructively due to lower anxiety and anger-hostility as a result of the intervention. Decreasing anxiety levels while going into a conflict can lead to better outcomes since the interaction may be marked by greater understanding as opposed to validating subjective points of view. Regardless, it seems that decreased anger-hostility and lowered anxiety as a result of mindfulness may be two important factors accounting for healthier conflict resolution patterns in intimate relationships.

A study Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom (2004) utilized a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement intervention and found that an average of 32 minutes of mindfulness per day led to significant improvements in coping efficacy in relation to relationship stress, which as a result

facilitated healthier communication between intimate couples. The participants also reported an increase in the acceptance of their significant other, which facilitated decreased defensive reactions and lowered perceived threatening judgments (Carson et al., 2004). In another study, Bihari and Mullan (2014) found that the participants described improvements in communication and developed an increased ability to see the other partner's perspective. The Participants of the study described reacting less to other people, which reflects internal change processes, such as decreased rumination about criticism and rejection. Mindfulness practice was correlated with decreased rumination and led to a reduction in negative interpersonal interactions based on attempts to avoid rejection.

Burpee and Langer (2005) state that when conflict arises, many couples create patterns of negative reactions which seems to actually intensify the original conflict. The emphasis of the conflict often shifts from finding a mutual solution to assigning blame on one of the partners. A mindful individual is less likely to make mindless attributions, and more likely to consider to take into account his or her spouse's point of view (Burpee & Langer, 2005). Mindfulness practice seems to facilitate perspective-taking by increasing an individual's ability to see an issue from the others point of view, which can increase emotional concern in relation to one's partner (Bihari & Mullan, 2014). Conflict is a common experience between couples and empathetic awareness of the others perspective can facilitate healthier conflict resolution patterns, which can lead to greater relationship and marriage satisfaction.

Another important component of constructive engaged communication is active listening which is inherent in the structured practice of mindfulness. Active listening is inherent within mindfulness because the practice is marked by an attentive engagement with the present interactive experience (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Active listening is enabled when the listener

has attentively understood the thoughts that the speaker is attempting to express (Phillips, 1999). Actively listening is marked by reflecting, clarifying, and often paraphrasing or summarizing the verbal and nonverbal messages of their partner's conversation through responding with understanding, probing, and questioning in order to develop greater cohesive interactions (Phillips, 1999). Utilizing active listening techniques inherent in mindfulness practice can significantly help partners feel understood, heard, and connected which can be an important marker of a healthy relationship (Burpee & Langer, 2005).

Facilitation of empathy, altering communication patterns, shifts in conflict resolution, active listening, and a reduction in habitually formed interpersonal interactions seem to have major relational benefits for individuals engaged in romantic relationships (Carson, et al., 2004). Healthy communication relies on many sub-components and is the result of many underlying mechanisms. These presented components are empirically supported mechanisms which seem to be central to developing more engaged and healthy communication patterns.

Emotional Regulation

Emotions affect personal interactions in intimate relationships and emotional regulation is a very important factor in facilitating healthier interpersonal bonds (Jones, et al., 2012). Mindfulness has consistently proven to be of considerable importance in regulating patterns of emotional expression within interpersonal interaction. Emotions play a key role in relationships and mindfulness can play a key role in regulating emotions. Structured mindfulness practice is beneficial in enhancing the affective component of intimate relationships, especially considering the emotionally challenging nature of couple's interactions (Cordova & Wachs, 2007). A short mindfulness intervention seeking to better understand the relationship between mindfulness and emotions found that controlled mindfulness practice was correlated with greater emotion differentiation, which appeared to have decreased emotional challenges. Furthermore,

participants attained a greater ability to report emotion dysregulation and felt emotionally liable for their behaviors (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). The sample group in this study was able to acquire higher levels of differentiation of unique emotional experiences and found mindfulness to be highly effective in enhancing emotional regulation (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Greenberg and Meiran (2014) found that experienced mindfulness meditators were able to have more control over emotional content and were able to down-regulate their affective levels when required to do so. They attributed the emotional regulating qualities of mindfulness to the phenomenon of meta-awareness. One's greater awareness of internal processes, such as the subjective experience of emotions, enables meditators to constructively engage with internal affective states. (Greenberg & Meiran, 2014).

A study by Wachs and Cordova (2007) utilized a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement intervention for married couples. Their findings suggest that developing emotional skills through mindfulness influences marital adjustment. Emotional repertoires, especially those associated with identifying and communicating emotions, as well as the regulation of anger expression, appeared to mediate the positive correlation between mindfulness and marital quality (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). They concluded that mindfulness led to the development of more constructive affective repertoires and enabled access to greater emotional empathy towards their partner, which can lead to a stronger connection and greater resiliency in the face of challenges.

There is a considerable amount of research showing that mindfulness can affect emotional regulation. An integrative review by Chambers, Gullone, and Allen (2009) brings greater clarity to this mechanism of action. They propose that mindful emotion regulation creates a greater awareness of emotional experience, regardless of the intensity of that emotion. This process does not involve suppression or reappraisal but rather systematically retrains emotional

awareness to be less reactive. This shift may allow the individual to more appropriately choose the thoughts, feelings, and labels they identify with and therefore enable new, more constructive, emotional repertoires to develop (Chambers et al., 2009). Developing new constructive patterns of affective connection with others can be central in fostering greater closeness and intimacy (Carson, et al., 2004). The development of new healthy behaviors as a result of mindfulness training facilitates healthy relationships and positive changes (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). There seems to be neuro-biological changes that account for the relational benefits of mindfulness.

Modern methods of objective testing through the use of fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and other neuroscience-based techniques of measurement have the capacity to show actual changes in the physical brain. Various studies are showing that mindfulness is directly affecting and altering structures, such as the Amygdala, responsible for emotional regulation. A study by Taylor et al. (2011) measured the impact of mindfulness in the neuronal response of emotion-inducing pictures on experienced meditators. The study found that moderately experienced mindfulness meditators had a down-regulation of the left amygdala during emotional processing. This finding is consistent with a large body of research supporting the notion that mindfulness is an effective agent in augmenting brain structures associated with emotion regulation. Illuminating the biological underpinning of psycho-affective change as a result of mindfulness practice is critical in further corroborating previous findings through the use of objective measurement techniques.

Other Mechanisms of Action

There are a number of other factors that partially account for the observed relational changes resulting from mindfulness practice. We will briefly explore the multitude of factors that may account for these relational benefits. There are many factors that can be identified as a source of distress for couples in intimate relationships (Carson, et al., 2004). Upon identifying a

distressor, one can explore whether mindfulness has been shown to modulate the construct responsible for the distress. If anxiety is a stressor in a relationship and mindfulness has been shown to decrease anxiety, then it can be useful to examine the potential effect that mindfulness can have on anxiety within a relational paradigm.

Appropriate levels of worrying have been proven to be adaptive in some cases, while habitual worrying has been shown to cause great dysfunction (Verplanken, & Fisher, 2014). Various studies have explored the role of habitual worrying on well-being and how mindfulness influences this pattern of behavior. Verplanken and Fisher (2004) conducted a study on how mindfulness can potentially change patterns of habitual worrying for the better. Their study found that dispositional mindfulness decreased patterns of habitual worrying. This perceived change seemed to be a result of focusing on the immediate experience, and maintaining an open and accepting attitude towards experiences as it is characterized in mindfulness practice (Verplanken, & Fisher, 2004). Another factor to consider is the relationship of mindfulness and spousal attachment within the population of married couples.

The attachment style and the way that partners feel connected to one another constitutes an important component in mindfulness practice (Carson, et al., 2004). Recent studies have shown how increasing trait mindfulness can increase the development of healthier attachment styles. A study by Jones, et al. (2011), demonstrated that mindfully relating to one's partner led to neurobiological changes which constituted activation and neural growth in various areas that are associated with safety, security, and positive affect, all of which can enable a healthier spousal attachment. This is very relevant since biological changes in the neural circuitry of the brain provide objective styles of data analysis which is not confined by the subjective

interpretation of the individual participants of the study. Furthermore, mindfulness provides an opportunity for couples to engage in an activity associated with well-being and growth.

A follow up study by Carson, et al. (2004) found that self-expanding activities increase couple well-being. They found that one of the factors that led to positive outcomes during the course of the program was simply enrolling in a mindfulness- based relationship enhancement program. The individuals in the study reported a sense of excitement for partaking in self-expanding activities in a joint format (Carson, et al., 2004). The study concluded that self-expansion was a mediator in relationship enhancement. The very process of going through a wellness-oriented program seemed to be partially sufficient for enhancing the relationship satisfaction of couples.

In this literature review we have discussed some central and peripheral mechanisms of action through which relational benefits are achieved as a result of mindfulness practice. There may be other mechanisms of action that were not covered in the presented review. The next segment will examine the methods, results, and findings of our study which explores the effect of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) on relationship satisfaction.

Chapter II: Methods

The current study explores the relationship between mindfulness and relationship satisfaction as mediated by emotional regulation and conflict resolution within the context of intimate relationships. The research question addresses whether a neutral mindfulness-based program can significantly alter the quality of intimate relationships. This question further examines the ways in which emotional regulation and conflict resolution may be augmented by mindfulness practice. The mindfulness training utilized in this study is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which is a highly standardized form of mindfulness training which provides consistent outcomes. The design, procedure, and methods of analysis are further discussed below.

Participants

Participants in this study included 33 individuals, 19 females and 14 males, between the ages of 24 and 63 residing in Northern California. All participants in this study volunteered to take part and no incentives, such as gift cards, were offered to anyone who participated. All participants were invited to enroll in the study by responding to an email that was sent out to prospective members of MBSR training courses set to begin in Winter of 2019. The engagement was coordinated with the help of MBSR teachers throughout multiple Meditation Centers based in Northern California. The study was well rounded in terms of ethnic diversity within participants. The demographics are as follows: 48.5% Caucasian, 21.2% Hispanic, 9.1% Asian, 6.1% African American, 6% Mixed race, 6% Middle Eastern, and 3% Indian. Two participants enrolled in the study did not complete the surveys after the program. This outcome left 31 participants who successfully enrolled in the pre-test and post-test portion of the study.

Materials

Informed consent forms were used containing information about procedures, benefits, and risks of participating. A sample version of this form is presented in the appendices. In addition, the contact information of the researchers was provided to the individuals enrolled in the study. The experiment design, informed consent, and the assessment instruments were presented to the Antioch University IRB and the study was accepted as appropriate and ethical, with minimal potential for harm to participants. Additional materials included a number of surveys and questionnaires that were completed both before and after the MBSR training through an online database. These questionnaires were designed to attain depth of information regarding meaningful variables such as mindfulness, intimate relationships, emotional regulation and conflict resolution. The materials utilized in the study were open source and free of cost to access and administer.

Design and Procedure

The research design of this study was non-experimental and correlational as it studied the relationship between a set of variables. The central variables in this study are mindfulness and relationship satisfaction as mediated by emotion regulation and conflict resolution. Each participant filled out a series of four questionnaires, totaling seventy-six questions, that measured the outcome of these variables. This research design used a pre-test post-test structure in which the scales and surveys were initially completed by the participants before the intervention and then were again after the intervention. This type of design helps us better understand the relationships of the variables within the context of the intervention. The nuance in this study lies in the process of this design. Even though the research question is regarding mindfulness and

relationships, the study will gauge whether a mindfulness-based program that is not geared towards relationship enhancement can affect relationship satisfaction.

Scales

Below is the list of scales that were utilized to acquire information on a series of constructs such as mindfulness, relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. All of the scales, besides the Conflict Intelligence Self-Assessment (CISA), have high validity and reliability based in evidence-based research. Therefore, we can assume that the acquired information is mostly reliable and has high utility in consistently reflecting the current outcomes when considering subjective measures. It is important to consider the fact that the scores are derived from subjective responses and that there were no objective measures, such as brain scans, to further provide objective information that could be utilized for further analysis.

MAAS- Mindful Attention Awareness Scale- The MAAS is a 15-item scale designed to assess a core characteristic of dispositional mindfulness, namely, open or receptive awareness of and attention to what is taking place in the present. The scale shows strong psychometric properties and has been validated with college, community, and cancer patient samples.

DERS- Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale- Difficulties in emotion regulation scale (DERS) The DERS (Gratz and Roemer, 2004) is a 36-item self-report measure of six facets of emotion regulation. Higher scores indicate more difficulty in emotion regulation. The psychometric properties of the DERS and its subscales are described throughout the manuscript.

RAS- Relationship Assessment Scale- The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) is a brief measure of global relationship satisfaction. It consists of seven items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale.

CISA- Conflict Intelligence Self-Assessment- Conflict intelligence self-assessment consists of 20 questions on a Likert scale. The questions are geared towards assessing how an individual currently rates their level of conflict intelligence, by considering variables that reflect aspects of conflict management.

Analysis

Given the repeated-measure design, the paired sample *t*-test was the most appropriate statistical method to analyze the results. The paired sample *t*-test, also referred to as the dependent sample *t*-test, is a statistical method that can be used to determine whether the mean difference between two sets of data is zero. If the mean difference of the two sets of observations is zero, then we can assume that there was no change and that there was no direct effect on the outcome as a direct result of the intervention. When the mean of the two sets is significantly different than zero, there is a substantial difference between the average scores of the pre- and post-test scores.

The *t*-test is a statistical methodology to compare the means of two groups, in this case, the test was utilized to compare the average scores of participants pre- and post-intervention. In a paired sample *t*-test, each participant is measured twice, once before and once after intervention, resulting in two separate sets of observations. In terms of addressing the research question, it is very clear that the dependent sample *t*-test is a meaningful method of computing the relevant data for this study. The limitations of our design will be discussed in the final section titled “Future Research and Limitations”.

Chapter III: Results

The research question addresses whether a neutral MBSR program can significantly alter relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. The results indicate that there is a clear relationship between mindfulness training and each of the three outcomes, including relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills.

The results found the mindfulness scores after the intervention were significantly higher ($t=15.89, p<0.001$). The size of this t statistic indicates that the difference between scores pre- and post-intervention were more than 15 times the average variability within each group. This means that it is very unlikely that there is no impact as a result of this intervention. The results found the relationship satisfaction scores after the intervention were also significantly higher ($t=16.78, p<0.001$). The size of this t statistic indicates that the difference between scores pre- and post-intervention were more than 16 times the average variability within each group. This means that it is very unlikely that there is no impact as a result of this intervention.

In addition, the results found the conflict resolution scores after the intervention were significantly higher ($t=21.32, p<0.001$). The size of this t statistic indicates that the difference between scores pre- and post-intervention were more than 21 times the average variability within each group. This means that it is very unlikely that there is no impact as a result of this intervention. Finally, the results found the emotional regulation scores after the intervention were significantly higher ($t=22.48, p<0.001$). The size of this t statistic indicates that the difference between scores pre and post-intervention were more than 22 times the average variability within each group. This means that it is very unlikely that there is no impact as a result of this intervention. These results collectively indicate that it is very likely that the changes perceived in

post-test scores is due to the intervention which in our case is the MBSR program. There is no possibility of drawing a causal based conclusion from these results. However, given our paradigm, we can say that the possibility that the outcome was due to chance alone is highly unlikely. The results here are not simply correlational since we are not just looking at how two variables may have a relationship with one another. The goal of this study is not just to see how variables may be related but rather to explore the role of the intervention on relational variables. Even though there are strong relationships and a very significant t -scores, causality cannot be assumed (although the design of this study makes it difficult to deny).

Below you will find the tables and graphs that represent the findings. There are three tables, one for pre-test outcomes, one for post-test outcomes, and one for the t -test results comparing pre and post test scores. The histograms provide a visual representation of where the participants scored before and after the intervention. The tables and graphs accurately represent the findings and provide other information such as the minimum, maximum, and the mean. The following tables and graphs are presented to provide a visual representation of the results:

Tables & Figures

Table 1

T Test Paired Differences of Pre and Post Test Scores

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mindfulness-Relationship-	16.516	5.796	1.041	15.866	30	<0.001
	3.903	1.300	0.234	16.716	30	<0.001
Conflict Resolution	18.226	4.752	0.853	21.355	30	<0.001
Emotional Regulation	22.677	5.630	1.011	22.428	30	<0.001

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre_Mindfulness	31	29	78	47.61	11.650
Pre_Relationship	31	10	24	16.48	3.285
Pre_Conflict_Resolution	31	31	71	45.77	9.939
Pre_Emotional_Regulation	31	38	104	74.42	19.418

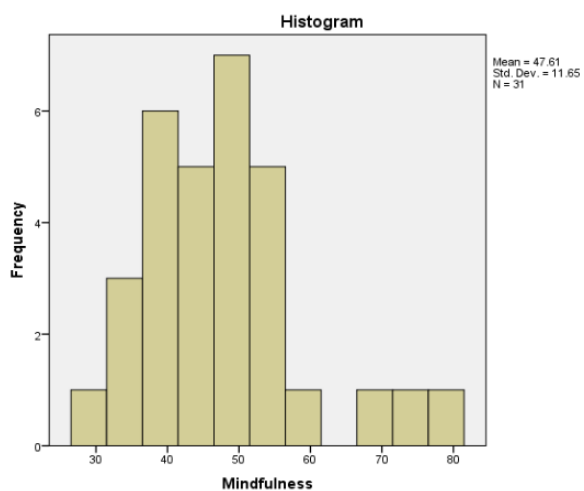


Figure 1 Histogram of the distribution of pre-test mindfulness scores

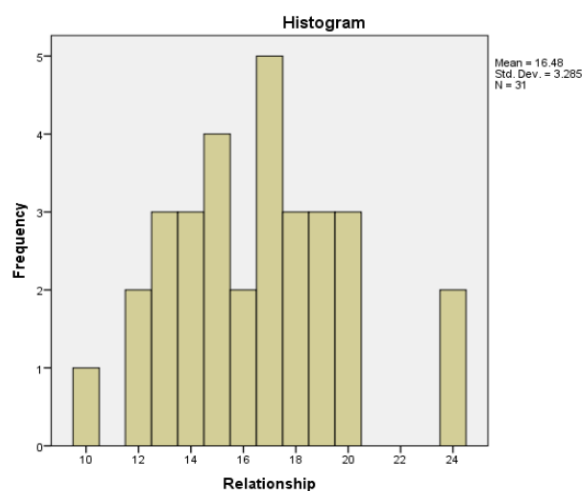


Figure 2. Histogram of the distribution of pre-test relationship scores

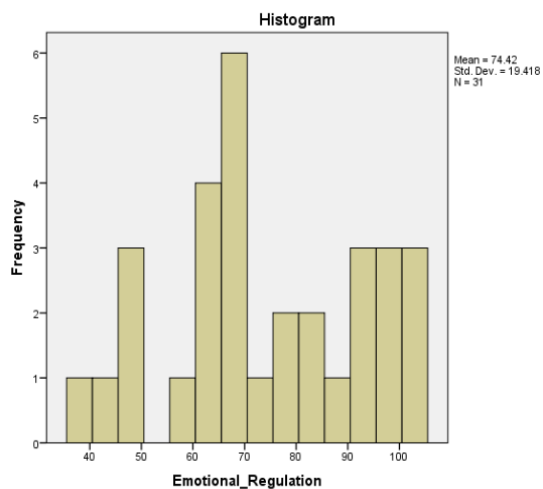


Figure 3. Histogram of the distribution of pre-test Emotion Regulation scores

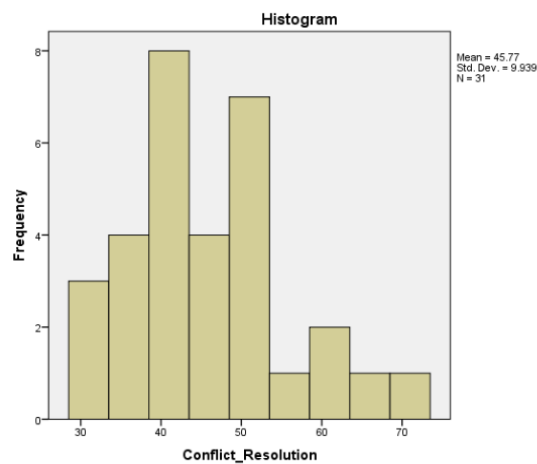


Figure 4. Histogram of the distribution of pre-test Conflict Resolution scores

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Post-Test Scores

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Post_Mindfulness	31	48	80	64.13	7.154
Post_Relationship	31	16	27	20.39	2.539
Post_Conflict_Resolution	31	52	75	64.00	6.319
Post_Emotional_Regulation	31	29	79	51.74	15.284

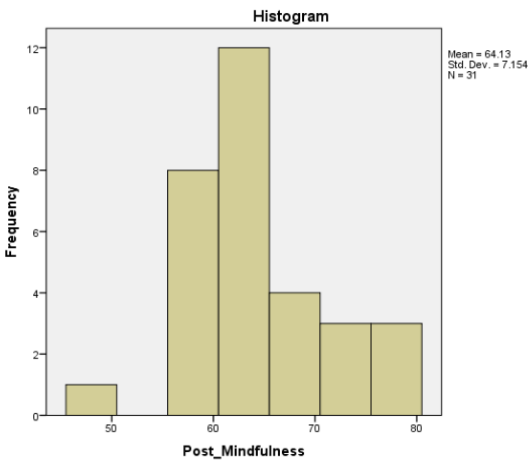


Figure 5. Histogram of the distribution of post-test mindfulness

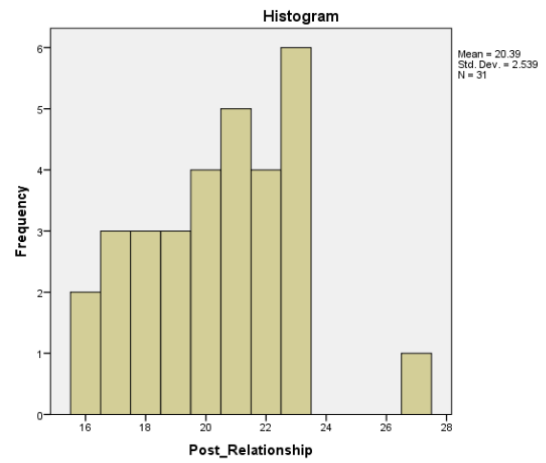


Figure 6. Histogram of the distribution of post-test relationship scores

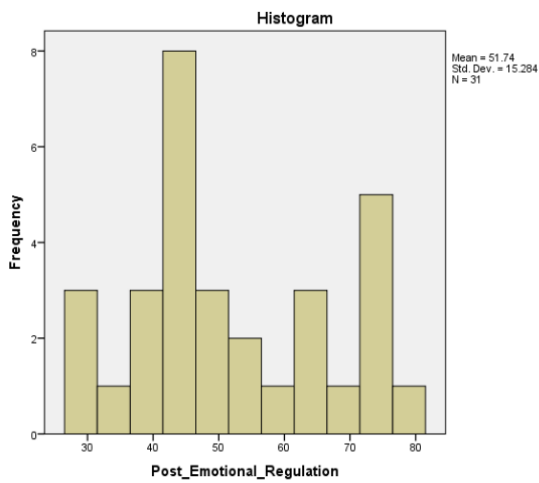


Figure 7. Histogram of the distribution of post-test Emotional Regulation scores

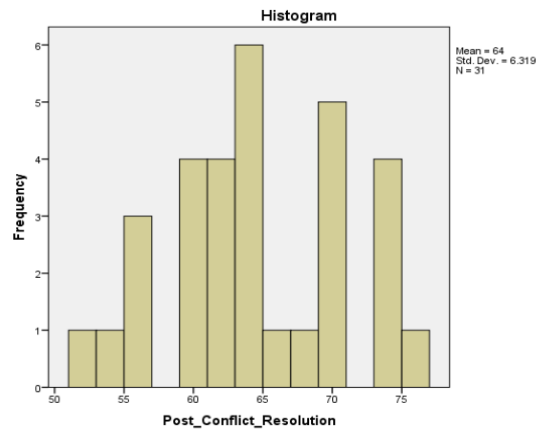


Figure 8. Histogram of the distribution of post-test Conflict Resolution

Table 4

Pre-test and post-test scores for Mindfulness.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test Mindfulness	31	29	78	47.61	11.650
Post-Test Mindfulness	31	48	80	64.13	7.154

Table 5

t-Test results for the comparison of pre-test and post-test mindfulness.

Paired Differences						
	Difference between Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p Value
Mindfulness	16.516	5.796	1.041	15.866	30	<0.001

Table 6

Pre-test and post-test scores for Relationship.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test Relationship	31	10	24	16.48	3.285
Post-Test Relationship	31	16	27	20.39	2.539

Table 7

t-Test results for the comparison of pre-test and post-test Relationship.

Paired Differences						
	Difference between Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p Value
Mindfulness	3.903	1.300	0.234	16.716	30	<0.001

Table 8

Pre-test and post-test scores for Conflict Resolution.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Conflict Resolution	31	31	71	45.77	9.939
Post-Conflict Resolution	31	52	75	64.00	6.319

Table 9

t-Test results for the comparison of pre-test and post-test Conflict Resolution.

	Paired Differences					
	Difference between Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p Value
Conflict Resolution	18.226	4.752	0.853	21.355	30	<0.001

Table 10

Pre-test and post-test scores for Emotional Regulation.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Emotional Regulation	31	38	104	74.42	19.418
Post-Emotional Regulation	31	29	79	51.74	15.284

Table 11

t-Test results for the comparison of pre-test and post-test Emotional Regulation.

	Paired Differences					
	Difference between Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p Value
Emotional Regulation	22.677	5.630	1.011	22.428	30	22.677

Chapter IV: Discussion

Mindfulness techniques have helped to effectively treat anxiety, personality disorders, depression, chronic physical pain, and substance addiction. Recent studies show the positive effects of mindfulness on relationship enhancement, emotional regulation, and skillful communication (Gambrle & Keeling, 2010). Our study utilized data from MBSR programs and attained information on how the eight-week program affected mindfulness, relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills. The study consisted of a sample of 31 individuals using a repeated measures design, with no wait-list control group. The program consisted of 8 weeks of MBSR training and the observed changes are documented through pre-test post-test measures, which provides empirical data regarding mindfulness, relationships, emotional regulation and conflict resolution. It was hypothesized that MBSR would enhance relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution amongst adult couples between the ages of 18-65. Through gauging the main identified mechanisms of action, we can gain deeper insight into the changes that resulted in enhanced relationship satisfaction. The literature review provided evidence that emotional regulation and conflict resolution are two central factors in developing and maintaining healthy intimate relationships, which the results of the study further affirmed.

The aim of this research is to explore mindfulness practice within a more specific context, by addressing mechanisms of action, and a broader context, by exploring the role of mindfulness in facilitating increased satisfaction in intimate relationships. The primary focus of mindfulness research has been the investigation of possible benefits of the practice for individual wellness. In addition to broadening the scope of such research by addressing relational benefits, we are also deconstructing mindfulness as a practice by examining the underlying processes of

change. Similar to a vehicle or any stratified system, mindfulness is the result of smaller sub-parts working together to create the larger emergent quality, often referred to as mindful awareness (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Based on these results we can further speculate on the mechanisms of action through which such change may be perceived.

There are two central implications that are posed here in this research. One is that mindfulness practice can be dissected and de-constructed through its mechanisms of action, which can de-mystify the practice and provide specific mechanisms through which positive change and growth is instilled. Second, it is breaking down the various components that can lead to beneficial changes in relationships. By identifying the underlying mechanisms of action, other researchers can explore other interventions that target these specific mechanisms of action. In addition, the results point to the relational potential of mindfulness. Such potential could be further researched in an attempt to shift the focus of mindfulness research from the individual to the group. Such shift could create greater awareness of wellness practices geared to help society as a whole and focus on practices that can create greater connectivity and social cohesion. The findings also dissect the mechanisms of action as a means to better understand the ways in which a singular practice can affect multiple facets of the human experience.

Mindfulness is often expressed in vague terms and the perceived benefits of mindfulness research are often attributed to “mindfulness” itself (Burpee & Langer, 2005). In addition to the existence of many different types of mindfulness practice, there are also many different benefits to mindfulness based on the nature of the practice (Motley, 1992). Research in this field should reflect the benefits of mindfulness while highlighting the specific mechanisms of action through which these benefits are attained. Mindfulness practice may be just one way to activate these specific mechanisms of action. By further breaking down and identifying the mechanisms

through which benefits are achieved, it may be possible to gain a better sense of the relationship between factors such as conflict resolution and emotional regulation in relation to mindfulness practice and other related interventions.

The literature has fairly clearly established that emotional regulation and conflict resolution are two important central factors in relationships. Perhaps through the understanding of how mindfulness effects these constructs, we can create more refined and specialized intervention that are specifically geared towards enhancing targeted areas. This research provides insight into specific mechanisms of action inherent in mindfulness which may prove to be useful in developing more specific mindfulness interventions in enhancing relationships. In addition, the relational benefits of such a practice could take on a more central role within the mindfulness research community.

Future research should aim to create mindfulness-based programs that are less vague, more specific, and specialized in order to maximize its potential for being a practice rooted in enabling specific positive change. In addition, the relational benefits of mindfulness practice should be further considered. In summary, this study proposes that mindfulness can enhance relationships possibly through increasing emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills.

Chapter V: Limitations and Future Research

There are many areas where research could prove to be helpful in further illuminating the role of mindfulness in self-other relationships. There are key terms that needs to be further defined and understood within the context of relational mindfulness, such as metacognition. Sustained attention, attention shifting, and non-elaborative qualities of awareness are defining characteristics of mindfulness practice, which is essentially meta-cognitive in nature, meaning that mindfulness requires monitoring and control, qualities directly related to metacognitive awareness (Bishop, et al., 2004). Bishop, et al. (2004) further state that mindfulness has been shown to increase an individual's ability to monitor and control stimuli entering the field of consciousness which can correlate to enhanced process awareness. Metacognition seems to be one of central themes in all mindfulness interventions. The mechanisms involved in relational mindfulness, such as emotional regulation and conflict-resolution, requires some level of self-awareness and meta-cognition. There is limited research on the relationship between meta-cognition and mindfulness. Further understanding the relationship between these two constructs may prove to be crucial in uncovering the most essential mechanism of action through which mindfulness is enabled.

Furthermore, it may be useful to shed greater light on the relational nature of mindfulness as a central framework. We live in a world that is marked by separation and tension, and which has decreased compassion and unity within the larger social macrocosm. Stanley (2012) argues that in addition to contextualizing mindfulness as a subjective internal state, it is critical to further understand mindfulness as a social practice for individuals and communities to attain greater cohesion, understanding, and compassion. In attempting to quantify a practice with societal underpinnings, it is key to understand the greater cultural implications. Our research has

sought to shed greater light on the aforementioned aspect of mindfulness. However, we must further examine the limitations of our research design.

Our repeated-measures design examined the same participants before and after an intervention. This model did not utilize a control group or a wait-list which limited our scope of analysis. There was no group to compare the outcome results with and the effect of the MBSR program could only be examined within the context of those who received the intervention. In a future study, the results could be explored in relationship to a group who did not receive any treatment, which could then further solidify or weaken the results obtained from the intervention. Our participants served as their own controls given the fact that the surveys were conducted before and after the intervention. Future research could utilize a control group to further assess and compare the outcomes of such study.

Our statistical method was limited since the only analysis that was conducted was a paired samples *t*-test. We found this method to be sufficient since there was a single intervention that was the focal point of the research. This analysis gave us insight into how the scores of the participants compared within a pre- and post-test paradigm. The outcome was sufficient to validate the notions that were being examined with a rather significant result, though it is acknowledged that further statistical analysis would provide greater insight into how the various variables were interacting with one another. Age, sex, ethnicity, and years of being in relationship with intimate partner were data that was gathered during the study. These factors could be included in these analyses in order to examine how such variables interacted with the results. Future research could utilize multiple regression models to examine the greater complexity of the statistical outcomes. Thus, although the paired sample *t*-test was deemed

sufficient for the purposes of our examination, it is clearly acknowledged that further analysis could be very illuminating.

Our sample size is considered sufficient, with 31 people completing the pre- and post-test surveys. There were 33 people enrolled in the study, with 2 people failing to successfully complete the post-test after the intervention was complete. The study set out with the initial goal of 50-100 participants. Given the limited resources it was not possible to achieve this initial goal while asserting that the sample size we did obtain was sufficient for the means of the study. With the current sample size, it is sound to develop meaningful inferences about the larger population. It is acknowledged that a larger sample size could further solidify the results of our study. We recommend that future research utilize a larger sample size to further solidify the inferences that are made about the larger population.

Another limitation we considered is the validity and reliability of the scales we utilized in the study. All of the scales besides the CISA were empirically validated and reflect high validity and reliability. The Conflict Intelligence Self-Assessment (CISA) was not empirically validated, though, was one of the most appropriate scales to assess conflict resolution skills. Other scales were considered but were not selected for various reasons. The CISA was ultimately selected upon the examination of the length, complexity, clarity, and format of the scales. This lack of validity and reliability creates room for error and decreases the confidence of the outcome. Future research can consider this limitation and utilize a conflict resolution skills survey that is empirically validated as a means of bringing greater validity and reliability to the results. The lack of validation does decrease the projected accuracy of the results. There is a consistent trend in the results across all of the scales which perhaps brings some level of projected accuracy. The

scale may have proven far less valid if the outcome of the other surveys were significantly different from the outcomes of the CISA.

An additional element to consider is the behavioral, emotional, and psychological qualities of individuals who are interested in mindfulness. Data was not gathered on the motivations individuals that drove them to enroll in the MBSR program. Such individuals are willing to take the step to further engage with a practice rooted in stress reduction and wellness. Such qualities are important to examine and consider to better identify the factors that drew them to the practice. There can be situational, social, endogenous, exogenous and many other motivators for a person to explore a mindfulness practice. It is important to ask what type of person is interested in mindfulness and why they are engaging with it now.

The final limitation presented in this research is the chronological nature of the repeated-measures design. The data was collected right before and after the intervention which in essence has no longitudinal value. The effects of mindfulness training may prove to show much greater complexity within a longitudinal design. Within such paradigm, future research could examine what may reinforce continued engagement in the practice. We know the effects of mindfulness are based on continued practice, bowing to the basic nature of plasticity within the brain. Given this factor, it could be significant to understand the ways in which continuity is achieved in a mindfulness-based practice. The participants in our study had just completed the training and all participants responded within 7 days of the last session. It is possible that the significant perceived increases in mindfulness, relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution were inflated by the timing. Awareness is central when it comes to subjective questionnaires as we are solely relying on the individual's self-perception. It's possible that MBSR training enabled participants to respond to the post-test surveys with greater awareness of

their behaviors that they were not aware of in the pre-test. Future research could utilize a longitudinal design that assesses the effect of mindfulness training over time while controlling for variables like continuity and frequency of practice, age, gender and other factors that may lead to variations in the findings.

Concluding Thoughts

The movement of philosophical ideas across geographic landscapes carries with it the subjective interpretation that the people project upon the ideas. This lens of interpretation is usually within the associative context that fits the collective cultural narrative. Therefore, ideas and practices don't objectively exist as an entity but only exists in relationship to the culture in which it integrates itself into. The core ideology of Buddhism as a practice is theorized to have been initially cultivated in India, near what is now modern-day Nepal (Kabat-Zinn et. al, 1985). These sets of ideas made their way over to China and the collective identity of the philosophy became known as Chan Buddhism. This form of Buddhism integrated itself with the ideas from Confucianism and Taoist practice that had shaped Chinese identity (Liu, 2006). Therefore, Chinese culture integrated Buddhism with that which it was familiar with, ultimately leading to the development of a hybrid philosophy that was more relevant to the collective culture.

A similar phenomenon took place when Buddhism moved over to Japan, where Zen Buddhism was born. They too incorporated aspects of Shinto philosophy and fused the familiar into that which was unfamiliar (Shih, 1953). A similar phenomenon took place when Buddhism found its way to the West. Mindfulness, the practice of bringing awareness to experience by engaging attention to that which has become familiar and automatic, such as the breath, has too been incorporated to fit the Western reductionist model that seeks to reduce all material to its mechanism of action and sub-component parts. We operationally define mindfulness within a particular framework because that's the part of the Buddhist practice and philosophy that is

reducible in a manner that may be useful to us. In a reductionist system we don't tend to look at the whole but rather at the sub-component parts we can manipulate. This is both the advantage and dis-advantage of reductionism. I have utilized this very reductionist methodology to be able to draw the conclusions I have made here. However, it can be limiting if we only take one point of the findings and draw conclusions that do not take the emergent whole into consideration.

Each Culture has a set of written rules, overarching obsessions, and acknowledged taboos. One apparent obsession in the West is the individuality of self. Media, commercials, and social conventions tend to place a central focus on how to continuously satiate the desires of the individual. Self-help books and wellness programs too tend to appeal to one's health, happiness, length of life, and other aspects of human life that serve the self. Even with Buddhism, a philosophy aimed at dissolving the individual ego-construct in an attempt to create greater group cohesion, is marketed as the practice to further substantiate the ego it was designed to dissolve. "Do you want to be Healthier? Happier? Smarter? Then mindfulness is just the thing for you! 8 weeks of mindfulness training can change your brain and biology!" Clearly this is an exaggerated depiction of the ways in which mindfulness is marketed. However, mindfulness has permeated our culture to serve the individual capacity of greater health, attention, awareness, and happiness. Now mindfulness can be used to enhance health and happiness and can even be used to aid relapse prevention and eating disorders. However, we must be aware of the obsession with self and explore how such a practice could enhance the relational aspects of our life and how mindfulness could lead to harmony between self, other, and the greater universe we exist in.

The goal of this study was to explore whether a mindfulness meditation course geared at the general population could in itself be sufficient to enhance relationships. Therefore, we are exploring the inherent ability of mindfulness practice to enhance our relations. The philosophy of

Buddhism places great emphasis on the community and the practices, such as mindfulness, were developed to help further achieve interdependent cohesion (Liu, 2006).

In a time of great discord and turmoil where the relationships of humans are weakened as evidenced by the crumbling marriage institutions and a crying earth, calling out for its saviors to rise and shift from greed and imbalance to harmony and balance, we must consider how a practice, such as that of mindfulness, could be used to interact with this discord. The focus towards the self and the ego-based results as a part of mindfulness have taken a very strong turn which does not necessarily serve the highest purpose of the practice. The practice is aimed at creating harmony between people and nature, to enable enlightenment, and to cultivate a world that is filled with compassion and goodwill.

We must assess how practices are used, what they serve, and how else they could serve us. This places a check and balances on dominant culture and the ways in which it guides the lens of how we relate practices that are deemed to be sacred ways of attaining deeper connection to the transcendent. There is not an inherent problem with using mindfulness for self-enhancement but it is argued that we should be conscious of how constructs are marketed and utilized by the masses. In addition, our collective cultural obsessions should be examined to further understand how philosophies are integrated within our society. For example, if we were a culture obsessed with compassion, it may be likely that the aspects of Buddhist practice that focus on compassion building, such as Metta, would potentially become more popularly researched and practiced.

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Appendix A

Consent Form:

"You are invited to participate in this research study because you are a enrolled in an 8 week MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) training program. In this study you will be asked to complete a survey to assess your conflict resolution and emotional regulation skills before and after the meditation program. The risks to participation in this research study may include loss of personal time while participating in the study. Fatigue and mild psychological stress related to completing questionnaires may occur. The information gained from this study could possibly be used to guide future research. All of the data collected will be confidential with no names attached to any of the data points. We will take reasonable steps to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your data. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person or agency required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during or after the research begins."