

**THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS as a BUFFER AGAINST PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS
AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN**

Thomas E. Owens

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Ram A. Cnaan, Ph.D.
Supervisor of Dissertation
Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Doctoral Education

John L. Jackson, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean, School of Policy and Practice

Dissertation Committee

Ram A. Cnaan, Ph.D.
Supervisor of Dissertation
Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Doctoral Education

Elizabeth R. Mackenzie, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Graduate School of Education

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Thomas E. Owens

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the fourteen mindful, African American men who participated in this study, I learned so much from all of you. I dedicate this work to my mother Lena Taylor who is the best and smartest mother in the world. I also dedicate this work to my two daughters Bianca and Erin. I could not have asked for two more beautiful and intelligent young women to be my daughters. I am so proud of both you. I dedicate this work to my son-in-law Afoyo who is naturally mindful. Moreover, I dedicate this work to my beautiful, patient and understanding wife Rev. Dr. Liat Richardson-Owens. I could not have done this work without your love, support, and prayers. You make everything better.

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS AS A BUFFER AGAINST PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

Thomas E. Owens

Ram A. Cnaan, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

The purpose of this qualitative study is to seek knowledge from African American men who have practiced mindfulness meditation (or yoga or transcendental meditation) on a regular basis and to ascertain if they were able to buffer the emotional, mental and social impact of psychosocial stressors due to the use of this practice. It will also be determined, by their shared retrospective experiences, if and how they managed to achieve a level of well-being, which may have enabled them to be active, connected and positive contributors in their respective communities.

Between the months of April to June 2016, fourteen African American men consented to participate in the research study. The ages of the participants ranged from 27 to 61. Eight of the participants completed an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course either at the University of Pennsylvania or Thomas Jefferson University. Five of the participants were self-taught (either by a friend, a relative, the internet, blogs, books or the use of an app) and one participant received formal training in yoga instruction in India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted which lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The participants shared their retrospective stories of lived experiences before the practice of mindfulness meditation and after the regular practice of mindfulness meditation.

The findings indicated the emergence of six themes: 1.) many mindfulness modalities, 2.) racism is experienced as a barrier to well-being, 3.) applying mindfulness at work, 4.) primacy of relational stress, 5.) mindfulness promotes self-regulation, and 6.) the mindful child. Limitations included a lack of socio-economic diversity among the participants. Implications for social work practice, future research, and the conclusion are discussed.

Keywords: African American men, Black males, qualitative studies, mindfulness, meditation and psychosocial stressors

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The past findings that justified the plan for this project were the vast amount of data, in the literature, which indicated many social, economic, educational, health and environmental disparities between African-American men as compared to other members of American society. These differences (which most likely are the result of institutional racism) cause chronic psychosocial stress in the lives of many African American men. The experience of the constant exposure to disproportionate amounts of stress, which eventually becomes chronic, has the magnitude to impact the well-being of the African American man negatively. This negative impact is also noted in his interactions with his family, his interactions within his community and his interactions with American society, as a whole.

PURPOSE

The aim of this qualitative dissertation is to seek knowledge from African American men who have used methods of mindfulness meditation practices and to discover if these men were able to buffer the disproportionate amounts of stressors that exist in American society, which indirectly or directly impact their lives. Through their shared retrospective experiences, it will be determined if and how they managed to achieve a level of well-being as a result of the regular practice of mindfulness meditation. The term *well-being* is defined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention as follows: There is no consensus on a single definition of well-being, but there is general agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g. contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotion (e.g. depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning, in simple terms,

well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good (2015). The data from this study may indicate if the participants were able to achieve a consistent level of well-being through the regular practice of mindfulness meditation that may have enabled them to actively and purposefully enhance their relational and social connections, within their communities and American society.

Another aim of the study (which depends on the findings) is to increase awareness of the benefits of mindfulness meditation to other African American men. These benefits could be an addition to their toolkit of emotional, mental and social supports. The regular practice of mindfulness meditation could assist some of these African American men with understanding to train the mind to view situations from multiple perspectives, to train the mind to clearly view perceptions of events within their environment; along with enhanced/increased - attentiveness, awareness, compassion, patience, focus and the cultivation of healthy thought processes.

Psychosocial stressors do not appear to show any signs of a decrease in some of the environments inhabited by many African-American men. These stressors are indicated by the current high rates of homicide, suicide, involvement with the criminal justice system, black on black murders and depression which may largely be due to their interaction to uncontrollable situations that occur in many of their environments. These environments also include high rates of crime, poverty and the existence of drug usage and sales which have become commonplace.

However, there are choices that many African American men make in these environments which may be considered mindless or impulsive in nature that place them at an even greater risk to succumb to the before mentioned psychosocial stressors. Mindless choices are a problem on multiple levels. Because, many African American men repeat the same

generational script that has been counterproductive to a life that is healthy emotionally, mentally and socially. Unfortunately, many African American men do not have the exposure, the resources or the mechanisms to effectively maneuver their way through the disproportionate amount of psychosocial stressors that may occur in their environments that can directly or indirectly impact their well-being. The lack of multiple and creative coping mechanisms leave some of these African American men at a significant disadvantage because it limits their opportunities to positively and purposefully participate in their communities and our American society. One of the key components to possibly achieve a higher level of the consistent presence of African American men (in our communities and our society) who have a healthy consistent level of (emotional, mental and social) well-being is the development of a higher state of awareness. The cultivation of a more mindful manner to view situations and the outcome of the choices that are made in their environments, as these choices may lead to tragic life altering results, are needed.

Perhaps, the cultivation of regular mindfulness meditation practice (e.g. yoga, transcendental meditation or mindfulness meditation) will help some African American men develop a higher state of awareness in an attempt to buffer the effects of the constant threat of psychosocial stressors which have a negative influence on their lives at numerous developmental stages. This qualitative study will provide retrospective, experiential insights from African American men who practiced mindfulness meditation on a regular basis. The analysis of these retrospective experiences will determine if the men were able to buffer the impact of psychosocial stressors due to the practice.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard (1995) and The National Urban Leagues (2006) reported that African American men continue to experience a disproportionate amount of psychosocial stressors parallel to other members of our society. One area that is of great significance in relationship to psychosocial stress is related to discrimination and racism. The detrimental effect of racial categorization on the social status of African American men is evident across a range of indicators, such as health status, poverty, and education (Pieterse & Carter, 2007).

Mager (2003) and Williams and Collins (2004) indicated that social scientists have constantly reported that, as a group, African American men are inclined to be at the lowest levels of social stratification and continue to experience substantial disparities in the areas of health, education, and wealth. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) stated that there is also some evidence that African American men experience more extreme discrimination than African American women across several realms which include: education, criminal justice and retail sales (Pieterse & Carter, 2007).

Western and Pittit (2005) and Mauer (2003) stated that social scientists frequently reference two indicators of social inclusion, mainly rates of incarceration and employment, when discussing the current black man within American society reported that almost one in three young African American men, ages 20-29, were under some form of criminal justice supervision. Moreover, half of all prison inmates are black a statistics that is significantly disproportionate to the percentage of African American men in the general population (Pieterse & Carter, 2007).

Western and Pittit (2005) specified that when one reviews employment rates, it is evident not only that African American men experience greater rates of unemployment but that even when

they are employed, their incomes are considerably less than that of their white counterparts. Jackson and Volckens (1998) argued that these types of statistics echo the impact of structural racism and also represent a significant source of stress that is connected with the unequal status experienced by blacks in the United States (Pieterse & Carter).

An added element thought to have a significant psychological impact is what Franklin (1999) discussed as the invisibility syndrome. Franklin stated that Black men tend to be assessed and related to on the basis of erroneous assumptions and negative stereotypes, as opposed to their individual achievements or characteristics. Franklin (2004) stressed that for example; a Black man could be very successful in his given career and still has trouble hailing a cab on the basis of the broadly accepted assumption that black men are dangerous. “These race-related occurrences are thought to have significant implications for the general well-being of Black men and, as such are increasingly being understood within the rubric of racism- related stress” (Pieterse & Carter, 2007 p.102).

African American men are still directly or indirectly disproportionately impacted by societal psychosocial stressors as indicated in the following data: The life expectancy at birth for black males in the U.S. (68.8) is lower than that for men in Iran (69.0), Colombia (69.3) and Sri Lanka (71.5) populations identified by the United Nations as having medium human development. In fact, the average life expectancy for black males is much closer to that of the life expectancy of many men in a third world country. White males have a life expectancy of (74.6) in the United States (Gadson, 2006).

Mental Health is another area of challenge for African American men. The onset of chronic stress, depression, somatization and other forms of mental illness may be linked to particular societal circumstances including racism/discrimination, homelessness, incarceration, poverty and substance abuse (National Alliance of Mental Health [NAMI], 2006).

In regards to education, householders who had lower levels of education were more likely to remain in or move into a lower quintile than households who had higher levels of education (Income and Poverty in the United States, 2014). About 48% of African American men 25 and older attended college although half of them did not complete a degree. The biggest disparity between black men and all men in America is with those who have a bachelor's degree. Only 17% of African-American men have a bachelor's degree compared to 30% of all men. Second is the number of African American men who finished high school but did not pursue higher education, 35% compared to 28% of all men (Black Demographics. Com/Black Male Statistics, 2013).

The major cause of stressors for many African American males is the unforeseen threat or risk of homicide in many of the communities in which they reside and in American society, in general. For African American men between the ages of 15 and 34, 60% of the deaths are due to homicide or accidents (NCHS, 2006). According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), homicide was indeed the number 1 killer of African American men between the ages of 15-34 (2011).

The CDC reports that accidents ranked second in the cause of death and suicide claimed the third amount of African American male lives between 15 and 24 years of age, while heart disease ranked third for men 24-34 (CDC, 2011). According to the CDC, compared to other

ethnicities African American numbers stand out. Forty percent of African American males 15-34 who died were murdered, according to the CDC, compared to just 3.8 percent of white men who died. Overall 14 percent of all men 15-34 who died were killed (CDC, 2011). In 2011, African American males 15-34 were ten times more likely to die of murder than whites of the same age group (CDC). The disparities continue, for all men of all ages, homicide was ranked fifth in leading causes of death for blacks (4.6 percent), seventh for Hispanics (2.8 percent), and ninth for Native Americans (2.3 percent). Homicide was not one of the top 15 causes of death for whites 15- 34 (CDC, 2011).

In terms of black on black homicides on an average, 4,472 black men were killed by other black men annually between January 1, 2009, and December 2012 according to the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (2012). FBI (2012) and CDC (2011) statistics indicated that 112 black men on average, suffered both justified and unjustified police involved deaths annually during this period. For every black man killed by a police officer, 40 black men were murdered by other black men.

African-American men Underrepresentation in Mindfulness Qualitative Literature

Studies of this nature on African American men who cultivate mindfulness meditation practices as a method to buffer the impact of psychosocial stressors are underrepresented (if at all) in the literature. Database searches, such as Google Scholar, Social Work Abstracts, Psych INFO, Cochran Library, and PubMed Plus did not yield literature when the keywords - African American men or Black males, qualitative studies, mindfulness, meditation and psychosocial stressors were entered. However, there are current studies that are indirectly related

to the topic that will be briefly summarized. The following five articles represent a sample of what is present in the literature, which is close to the topic.

Schneider et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative study on African American men and women, mean age 49 (n=150) who suffer from hypertension. The study was titled A Randomized Controlled Trial of Stress Reduction in African Americans Treated for Hypertension for Over One Year.

The study was an intervention that compared the use of Transcendental Meditation (TM) and two controls - general health education (HE) or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR).

Schneider et al. (2001) conducted a quantitative study with African American men and women with hypertension and heart disease twenty-one to seventy years of age (n=170). The study was titled Behavioral Treatment of Hypertensive Heart Disease in African Americans: Rationale and Design of Randomized Controlled Trial. The study was an intervention which compared the use of Transcendental Meditation versus a control of - lifestyle education in the treatment of hypertension and hypertension heart disease in urban African Americans.

Schneider et al. (2012) conducted another quantitative study, which focused on African American men and women 49-59 years of age (n=201) who suffered from cardiovascular disease (this is a 5.4-year follow-up to a previous study). The study was titled, Stress Reduction in the Secondary Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease (CVD): Randomized, Controlled Trial of Transcendental Meditation and Health Education in Blacks. The study measured the outcomes of an intervention initiated over a 5.4 year period, in which blood pressure, hospitalizations, psychosocial stress factors and lifestyle behaviors were examined. The participants either practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) for 20 minutes two times daily or received the control

which was Health Education (HE), in which the participants were given a heart-healthy task like exercising, healthy diets and non-specific relaxation.

Sibinga et al. (2011) conducted a mixed method study on at-risk urban youth with HIV (ages13-21). The study was titled Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Urban Youth. The youth (n=26) participated in a nine-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

The purpose of the study was to assess acceptability and domains of the effects of MBSR in connection with the at risk infected HIV urban youths in the areas of interpersonal relationships, school achievement, physical health and reduced stress.

Sibinga et al. (2014) conducted another mix method study on youth (ages13-21) called A Small Mixed-Method RCT of Mindfulness Instruction for Urban Youth (n=43). The purpose of the study was to explore the effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for urban youth by comparing MBSR with an active control program called Healthy Topics (HT) which was designed to control for time, positive peer group experience and positive adult instructor.

The presented articles denote, what appeared to be the general content and focus in the literature on mindfulness meditation as an intervention against stress (or psychosocial stressors). The focus seemed to be mainly quantitative or mixed methods and the participants, when African American, were either men and women or youth. Moreover, the studies were generally interventions, focused on the impact of mindfulness meditation practices in relationship to physical conditions, such as hypertension, HIV or chronic pain. As was previously mentioned, the qualitative study of African American men in relationship to mindfulness meditation practices as a buffer against psychosocial stress appeared to be underrepresented in the literature.

However, the outcomes of the data from the five articles are of great importance to the topic of this study. The results of Schneider et al. (2005) randomized trial indicated that “the TM program may be effective in the reduction of hypertension in African American adults when used as an adjunct to the usual care, at least during year one” (P.11).

The results of the Schneider et al. (2012) study also indicated positive results. “The randomized controlled trial found that a selected mind-body, stress reduction intervention, TM program, significantly reduced the risk of mortality, MI, and stroke in black men and women, with coronary heart disease” (Schneider, p. 756). The modifications in clinical measures were related to decreased blood pressure and psychosocial suffering (Schneider, 2012). Therefore, the TM program could be clinically beneficial for behavioral intervention in the secondary prevention of CVD in this and possibly further “high-risk populations” (Schneider, 2012).

The results of the data from the third article by Schneider (2001) entitled, Behavioral treatment of hypertensive heart disease in African Americans: Rationale and design of randomized controlled trail, have not yet been presented or published.

The results of the Sibinga (2014) article indicated what appeared to be positive results in the area of qualitative research. “Compared with an active control program, MBSR did not result in statistically significant differences in self-reported survey outcomes of interest but was associated with qualitative results of increased calm, conflict avoidance, self-awareness and self-regulation for urban youths” (p. 180).

The results of the Sibinga (2011) article appeared to be positive. The quantitative data indicated that the MBSR program participants showed a “significant reduction in hostility, general discomfort, and emotional discomfort” (p. 216). The qualitative results indicated

“perceived improvements in interpersonal relationships (including fewer conflicts), school achievement, and physical health and reduced stress” (p. 216). However, in conclusion, it was noted that “the data indicated that the MBSR instruction for urban youth might have a positive effect in domains related to hostility, interpersonal relationships, school achievement and physical health” (Sibinga, p. 13). Noted limitations of the study were the small sample size and the lack of comparisons with an active control group (Sibinga, 2011).

In summary, *The Introduction* section provided statistical relevance to the fact that many African American men continue to experience a disproportionate amount of psychosocial stressors as compared to other groups in American society. The problem or the “so what factor” is when one particular group, in this case, African-American men, experience chronic discrimination, the impact of covert and overt socio-political institutional racism has been proven to be detrimental in enormous proportions to the well-being of some African American men. The results of psychosocial stress due to the experiences of chronic racism and discrimination not only impact this particular group but also their families, their communities and their connections/relationships with American society.

When one views the *Purpose, Background and Significant* sections one may, in regards to connection, determine that many African American men are not presented the full opportunity to connect with American society or that this connection is an extreme and constant challenge to obtain, if it is obtained at all. The concept of individual, societal and cultural connection and disconnection along with the individual’s ability to make choices within his environment will be reviewed and discussed later.

The disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors that impact many African American men appear to be a constant.

Perhaps the cultivation of the use of mindfulness practices may provide a source of control or a buffer (emotionally and mentally) in environments, in which one may have perceived that he has no control over the psychosocial stressors. It should be strongly noted that mindfulness meditation may act as a buffer against psychosocial stress among African American men who practice. However, America as a society is ultimately responsible for the correction of these disproportions. This dissertation views the existence of the two constants, the disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stress that impact many African American men and the experiences of the principles and the benefits of mindfulness meditation practices among African American men that may be utilized as a buffer against the former.

The next section of this chapter is the literature review - *What is Mindfulness, What is meditation?* This section will focus on the historical origins of mindfulness meditation and its perceived benefits. The chapter will be an exploration of the mechanisms and processes of both mindfulness and meditation.

LITERATURE REVIEW: WHAT IS MINDFULNESS, WHAT IS MEDITATION?

THE ORIGINS OF THE WORD MINDFULNESS

The purpose of this discussion is to provide a road map of the complexities, similarities, and ambiguousness of the ancient word *sati*, which now holds the contemporary meaning of the subjective, consciousness movement presently known as mindfulness. Mindfulness appears to have originated from the teachings of Buddha who lived and sometimes taught between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. Since then, Buddha's teachings were bestowed on Buddhist monks to be practiced as a way of life and as a method to be used to eliminate the *suffering* of life.

Germer (2004) and Gethin (2011) examined the writings of Davids (1881) and provided the needed translations of the ancient Pali Canons to assist in this discussion. The Pali Canons is

the oldest complete, undamaged collection of Buddhist writings to endure, throughout the centuries (Bodhi, 2011). Germer traced the word mindfulness from 2500 years ago to the English translation of the Pali (an ancient Indian Sanskrit-based language) word *Sati*. “Sati” means – awareness, attention, and remembering. Pali is also the language of Buddhist psychology with mindfulness being essential in its instruction of the tradition. (2004).

Gethin’s provided an examination of Thomas William Rhys Davids’ work, which was published, in 1881, that centers on the translations of the seven *suttas* (which are Buddhist scriptures). These translations came from the Digha and Majjhima Nikayas (Sutta, Pitaka, Pali Canon, 29BCE), which is a collection of Buddhist scriptures of the long discourse of the last days of Buddha (Gethin, 2011). Gethin stated that Davids’ translation of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (which are also scriptures that focus on the end of the life of Buddha) regarding the word *sati* are somewhat ambiguous (2011). Throughout this work, Davids changed his meaning of the word *sati* from “mental activity” to simply “thought” (Gethin, 2011). Davids’ meaning of *sati* differs from the before mentioned definition provided by Germer (2004). The words “remembering” and “memory,” which will be later noted in Davids’ description of the concept of “right-mindedness,” share a common thread. Gethin emphasized that Davids, most likely, made mindfulness his preferred translation (2011).

When introducing the translation of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, which is another scripture that speaks of the last days of Buddha, Davids provided these remarks as he addressed the samma-sati (right-mindedness) in the framework of *the eightfold path* (which will be discussed later, in detail):

sati is literally “memory” but is used with reference to the constantly repeated phrase “mindful” and “thoughtful” (*sato sampajano*) and means activity of mind and the constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently calculated on the good Buddhist (Davids, 1881, p. 145).

There is a debate among historical scholars as to whether the word “mindfulness” is a direct translation from the Pali Canons. Gethin’s noted that Davids made mindfulness his preferred translation (2011). The reviewed literature indicated similarities as mentioned in the recurrent themes from the Pali Canons, from the different authors Germer (2004) and Gethin (2011) through the writings of Davids (1881), such as: awareness, attention, memory, remembering, constant presence of mind, thought, thoughtfulness, mental activity, and activity of mind which are characteristically very closely associated with what is presently known as relational elements of mindfulness. Therefore, it appeared that Davids (1881) eventually translated the word *sati* and its various similar meanings as mindfulness, which is accepted as a fact by many authors who have written on the topic of mindfulness and referenced Davids’ work.

TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY & DOCTRINES AND THE PRACTICE OF THESE DOCTRINES AS A METHOD TO ELIMINATE THE SUFFERING OF LIFE

Two laws define the core of Buddhist philosophy: the Four Noble Truths, which are doctrines and the Noble Eightfold Path, which equates practice of the doctrines (Bodhi,1999). The Four Noble Truths came from the Kalama Sutta (which is a scripture) in the Pali Canon, in which Buddha, in his travels, speaks to the people of a small village about the concept of choosing what to *believe* (in terms of dogma and religion), he stated that “only when you see for yourself that a practice leads to suffering or well-being then you should either reject or accept it” (Maex, 2011, p. 168). Maex mentioned that the basis of this particular text is to explain that suffering is “at the core of it all” (2011).

The first Noble Truth is an awareness of the ever present existence of suffering; the second truth is the origins of suffering; the third truth is the ending of suffering (Maex, 2011). “The Fourth Noble Truth is the path leading to the cessation of suffering, the path is known as the eightfold path” (Maex, 2011, p. 168). To reiterate, knowledge of the lessons of the eightfold path leads to the methods of practice as to how to possibly eliminate the suffering of life, with mindfulness as the core method of the accepted practice. The Eightfold Path is part of this discussion since the framework of the eightfold path, was previously mentioned by Davids when explaining the concept of “right-mindedness.” Bodhi stated that the Noble Eightfold Path is a matter of practice as opposed to intellectual knowledge (1999).

The practice of the Eightfold Path brings the teachings of the doctrines noted in The Four Noble Truths “to life” and are therefore paramount; the eight factors are as follows: “I. the way to end suffering, II. right view, III. the right intentions, IV. right speech, right action and right livelihood, V. right effect, VI. right mindfulness, VII. right concentration and VIII. the right development of wisdom” (Bodhi, 1999, p.1). It could be viewed that the active practice of the lessons listed in the Eightfold Path, by the Buddhist monks, was a way to enhance the functional process of mindfulness as the method to eliminate the suffering in life and as *the* way to live life.

Bodhi delivered a more comprehensive description of the ancient origins of the disciplined practice of mindfulness, found in the Pali Canons. Bodhi noted that within these scriptures exist the Buddhist meaning of mindfulness, Satipatthana Sutta, the “Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness” begins with a declaration emphasizing the purpose of this training and its approach (2011):

Monks this is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the passing away of pain and displeasure, for the achievement of the method, for the realization of *Nibbana* that is the four establishments

of mindfulness. What four? Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure regarding the world. This, monks, is the one-way path for the purification of beings ... for the realization of *Nibbana*, that is, the four establishments of mindfulness (p. 21).

Bodhi further expanded the concept of the four establishments of mindfulness. The Buddha specifies this proclamation as the *goal* of the practice of mindfulness, which is the obtainment of the ability to eliminate the suffering of life and the fulfillment of “*Nibbana* (Sanskrit, the philosophical language of Buddhist, translates *Nibbana* to mean *Nirvana*) - a state of transcendent bliss and peace (Bodhi, 2011). The author further stated that the previously mentioned four establishments of mindfulness from what is now termed right mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011).

Right mindfulness is further divided into objective and subjective realms. Bodhi noted that within the realm of objectivity one must, without conscious thought, examine his or her relationship with the four objective domains of “ the body, feelings, states of mind, and experiential phenomena” (2011, p 21.).

One’s reaction with subjective right mindfulness focuses on the unity of cerebral processes in relationship to mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011). Within the view of the Satipatthana, the practice of mindfulness emerges in connection with *anupassana*, which is translated to mean “contemplation” or literally “observation” (Bodhi, 2011). The prefix of *anupassana* is *anu* which means *repetition* or *closeness* and the base of *anupassana* is *passana* that is translated to mean *seeing* (Bodhi, 2011). “Mindfulness is part of a process that involves a close, repetitive observation of the object” (Bodhi, 2011, p. 21).

In this section, Maex (2011) explored the doctrines of the discourse of the Four Noble Truths as the acknowledgment of the ever present existence of suffering.

Moreover, Bodhi (2011) examined the methods of practice found in the Eightfold Path as the way to, through the practice of mindfulness, eliminate the ever present existence of suffering.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS? MINDFULNESS DEFINED

What is mindfulness? The definitions of mindfulness vary. However, certain similar elements exist within each of the reviewed definitions, as traditional and contemporary culture influences these interpretations. Within this section, there will be references to multiple definitions of mindfulness for similarities and differences. However, many of the reviewed definitions share a close comparative framework to the next definition. A concrete definition of what is mindfulness is not provided due to these close similarities. However, these similarities will be summarized. An individual must experience multiple processes to achieve a state of mindfulness. These processes need to occur mutually and do not occur overnight but are achieved through disciplined practice.

The works of Baer (2003), Bishop et al. (2004), Brown and Ryan (2004), Carson and Langer (2006), Kabat-Zinn (1990,1994), Langer (1997, 2006) and Siegel, Germer, and Olendzki, (2009) will be referenced in this section. Upon review of the literature written on the subject of mindfulness (be it – what is mindfulness and where did it come from?, the constructs of mindfulness, mindfulness interventions or the relationship of mindfulness to other psychological disciplines) by authors such as: Bishop et al. (2004), Germer (2004), Shapiro et al. (2006) and Siegel et al. (2009) all used the definitions of mindfulness created by Kabat-Zinn to support their individual research findings. Kabat –Zinn defined mindfulness “as the moment to moment awareness of purposely paying attention” (1990).

Another slightly longer definition of mindfulness often used by authors attempting to define mindfulness also comes from Kabat-Zinn, which states, “awareness that occurs by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (1994, p.4). Brown and Ryan’s definition mirrors Kabat-Zinn’s, which states that mindfulness encompasses activeness to and awareness of “what is taking place in the present moment” (2004). Baer’s definition of mindfulness also shares similarities to Kabat-Zinn’s. Baer defines mindfulness as “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (2003, p.125). Baer introduces the concept of internal and external stimuli which is a direct relationship to one's response to the present external environment and the present internal processes that occur simultaneously in the mind and the body, be it – good, negative, painful or pleasurable. Langer’s definition of mindfulness appears to be more of a list (as opposed to a philosophical statement) which include elements of – “openness to novelty, alertness to distinction, sensitivity to different contexts, implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives and orientations to the present” (1997).

The essence of mindfulness is one of a flexible and open “mindset” in which one remains actively engaged in the process of drawing “novel distinctions” about the environment is more beneficial than a mindset in which one is judgmental and rigid, sacrificing flexibility for a sense of certainty (Carson & Langer, 2006). One should notice each situation with “novel distinctions” as if viewing the experience for the very first time; one should make unique distinctions with each and every observation (2006). The Carson and Langer’s definition highlights the concept of viewing situations from multiple perspectives.

Bishop et al. presented two “operational” definitions of mindfulness, which are interrelated and involve self-regulation of attention and orientation to experience. Mindfulness

involves the "self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on the immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment" (Bishop et al. 2004, p. 232). The second part of Bishop et al. definition of mindfulness comprises of "adopting a particular orientation toward one's experience in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (2004). The Bishop et al. definitions of mindfulness contain similar elements that encourage one to use different perspectives when experiencing a situation shares elements of Carson and Langers' concept of viewing every situation with novel distinction – as if experienced for the first time.

In summary, the Kabat-Zinn definition of mindfulness has frequently been utilized by various authors as a functional definition of - what is mindfulness?, which is "awareness which occurs by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (1994, p. 4).

THE PROCESSES OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

There are multiple processes that must occur, which involve the cultivation of purposeful behaviors on the part of the individual to achieve a conscious state of mindfulness practice; such as: attention to one's breathing, attention to the present moment, awareness of the present moment, intentionality, refinement of an attitude conducive to mindfulness, a non-judgmental mindset in terms of the flow of thoughts and bodily sensations that occur moment to moment, and acceptance. The emotional, mental and social well-being benefits of the processes of mindfulness practice occur during our moment to moment experiential existence while we are walking, talking, working, thinking, reading or driving. One does not have to be in a meditative stance, sitting quietly in a lotus position for 20-45 minutes with eyes closed, to practice the

processes of mindfulness. Once again, it should be noted that these methods should be practiced simultaneously and take time and patience to cultivate. This segment of the discussion will focus on the processes needed to practice mindfulness, as a way of being.

There appears to be the emergence of a pattern, many of the listed components of mindfulness were mentioned in the discussions on the *Origins of Mindfulness* and the *What is Mindfulness? Mindfulness Defined*. The references of Dreyfus (2011), Germer (2004), Kabat-Zinn (1990), Olendzki (2001), Parker et al. (2015), Shapiro et al. (2006) and Siegel et al. (2009) will provide details, in this section, of the processes of mindfulness that focus on attention to breathing, attention to the present moment and awareness. Kabat-Zinn notes intentionally paying attention to one's breath is both a simple and sometimes difficult method to use to remind oneself to remain in the present moment (1990). Kabat-Zinn also suggested that we should momentarily remember to focus on our breathing in a natural manner, not intentionally deep breathing (1990). "Bringing awareness to our breathing we remind ourselves that we are here now (in the present), so we might as well be fully awake for whatever is already happening" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990 p. 18). Attention is the process of focusing conscious awareness; therefore, awareness and attention are interwoven (Germer, 2004). Siegel indicates that *presence* is "the bare awareness of the receptive spaciousness of our mind; it is a state of receptive awareness of our open minds to whatever arises as it arises" (2007, P. 160-161).

Parker et al. provided a detailed but extremely significant statement of the processes that may occur when one works to achieve a state of mindfulness in the present moment:

Presence can be viewed as a state of open awareness to what emerges in the flow of *conscious experience*, moment by moment. We can identify multiple aspects of presence, using the qualifying term *bare attention* to refer to the quality of conscious experience that is filled with the direct experience of here-and-now sensory information with little filtering by top-down processes acquired from previous events.

We can also distinguish this bare attention from *mindful awareness*, in which we propose that there is the activation of an observing self that is “attuned” to an experiencing self: a witnessing circuit that is open and curious to what is happening in the sensory unfolding of the moment, along with the broader context of one’s experience also within awareness. The *mindfulness* component adds to bare attention the quality of being aware without being swept up by judgments. This nonjudgmental awareness of being fully and intentionally present has emotional, physiological, and interpersonal impacts on experience (2015, p. 226).

Bishop et al. (2004) supported multiple elements of Parker’s statement concerning the process of presence in relationship to awareness of *observation* in general and the cultivation of a sense of *curiosity* along with support for Kabat- Zinn’s (1990) writings on the importance of focus and attention to *the breath*. Bishop et al. stated that one should make a “commitment” to sustain an attitude of curiosity about where the mind “wonders” whenever it unavoidably leaves the present moment. As well as a sense of curiosity towards the various “objects” that are present within one’s moment to moment existence (2004). “All thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise are initially seen as relevant and, therefore, subject to observation” (Bishop et al., p. 233).

Olendzki viewed the discussion of the cultivation of mindfulness processes and its impact on what many may perceive as basic conscious mental functions (such as attention to one's breathing, attention to the present moment and awareness) from a constructivist perspective and suggested that in order to cultivate a state of mindfulness in relationship to the manner in which one responds to the above mentioned moment to moment occurrences, one must “train the mind” from a mindful perspective (2011). Mindfulness involves training the mind to be aware of what it is doing at all times, including being aware that we are thinking when we are thinking (Siegel et al., 2009). Olendzki mentioned the concept of the 19 wholesome universals, which include mindfulness, non-hatred, non-greed, conscience and respect. Unwholesome universal mind moments also exist that represent “misbehaviors.” The concepts of wholesome and unwholesome

universals are from the Abhidhamma (ancient Buddhist doctrines), which are mental factors that occur in conjunction with every mind moment (2011).

As was mentioned, mindfulness is one of the 19 wholesome universal factors. Olendzki stated that “as a universal wholesome factor, mindfulness is exclusive of restlessness, delusion, and all other unwholesome states and cannot co-arise with these in the same moment” (2011, p. 61).

Olendzki further stated that a universal wholesome factor is “a mental state that arises repeatedly above basic levels of attention, intention and one-pointedness, and arises over and above factors that help train the mind, such as applying and sustaining attention on a consciously chosen object of awareness – the factors that co-arise with mindfulness under all circumstances also help define it and refine how it functions in the mind” (2011, p.61). Siegel et al. supported the discussion presented by Olendzki in that mindfulness processes must be in the proper context or mindset. Siegel et al. mentioned when mindfulness is used out of the greater context, its influence is weakened as one strives for awareness (2009). Siegel et al. noted that we do not properly utilize the processes of mindfulness when we are attempting to harm ourselves or others (2009). As previously mentioned by Olendzki, as unwholesome universals. Siegel et al. stated within the proper context of mindfulness our intentions and concentration must be used for good (2009). It is hard to experience a fulfilling mindfulness practice after a day of deceitfulness, larceny and “killing” (Siegel et al., 2009). “Therefore the core purpose and the spirit of practicing mindfulness are to bring peace to one’s self and peace to the world” (Siegel et al. 2009, p.33).

Throughout this discussion authors, Kabat-Zinn (1990) and Parker (2015) mentioned the use of attention and intention in their writings. Shapiro et al. add another factor to the concept of

intentionally paying attention to the present moment. Shapiro et al. added attitude as a needed component in relationship to the processes of mindfulness practice. The authors stated that intention, attention, and attitude create the three axioms of mindfulness noted as - IAA (Shapiro et al., 2009). However, unlike Kabat-Zinn (1999) and Parker's (2015) view of the relationship of intention and attention as a single individual elements of the process of mindfulness, Shapiro et al. view intention, attention and attitude as a single sequence (IAA), a process that happens concurrently and not independently (2009). It is the refinement of this simultaneous process that creates a moment of mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2009).

In addition to the creation of the IAA axiom and its relationship to mindfulness, Shapiro et al. discussed the concept of a process that occurs in terms of heightened perception for individuals who continuously practice mindfulness. The authors use the term *reperceiving*, "the manner in which a person consciously perceived their moment to moment thoughts and body sensations changes over time, in that, objectivity and clearness are now significantly enhanced due to the practice of mindfulness in conjunction with the IAA process" (Shapiro et al., 2009, p.377). These authors further stated that "our previous way of perceiving is now *reperceived* as we attempt to decrease our mindless thoughts and live in the present moment" (Shapiro et al., 2009, p. 377). Carson and Langer's (2006) previous discussion on viewing every situation from the perspective of a "novel distinction" as if for the first time mirrors Shapiro et al.'s *reperceiving* concept.

Thus far in this discussion on the relationship of attention, presence and awareness which are needed elements of the processes of mindfulness practice, the focus of these relationships have been present-centered as indicated by the use of the repeated phases of: *be in the here and*

now, be in the present moment and experience the moment as it arises, as mentioned in the writings of Kabat-Zinn (1990), Parker et al. (2015) and Shapiro et al (2009).

Dreyfus provided a conceptualization of mindfulness in the current literature in two particular areas (present-centeredness and being nonjudgmental). However, only one topic will be addressed in this brief discussion, which is the connection between mindfulness and the present moment. Dreyfus asked the question, does mindfulness need to be present-centered? (2011). Dreyfus proposed that the process of mindfulness should also coexist in the realms of paying attention to an object in a present-centeredness manner and in a way in which remembrance of that object is also practiced (2011).

Dreyfus suggested that the “classical” Buddhist accounts found in the Abhidharma speak of the ability of the mind to be “retentive” (as in holding an object to memory and later remembering that experience) in relationship to the process of mindfulness practice (2011). Dreyfus stated that the central feature of mindfulness is to “hold its object and thus allow for sustained attention regardless of whether the object of attention is present or not” (2011, p 43.) Acknowledgment of the coexistence of presence and retention in mindfulness practice is lost in translation with many authors on the topic. Upon review of the literature for this discussion Dreyfus’ observation seems to be accurate. Earlier in this discussion Germer (2004) mentioned that the definition of the word *sati* which was closely translated to mean mindfulness has the word “remembering” as a component and action of its meaning and within the Davids’ (1881, p. 145) quote the word *sati* which once again was relational to the definition of mindfulness; the word “memory” is used in connection with the definition. From a practice perspective, Dreyfus’ argument is well understood. The retention of the remembrance of past moments, such as the first view of an object of great interest, an experiential occurrence, bodily sensations

(pleasurable or unpleasurable) could in reality be used as a point of reference for experiences in the present moment - as these moments are illuminated and intensified by the practice of mindfulness.

Many human services professions and social science disciplines, such as: social work, addictions treatments, behavioral and cognitive therapies, use a theoretical framework in which acceptance of the reality of one's current situation is a significant factor in the decision to make a sincere effort to begin the work to achieve a particular desired life transformative goal. The writings of Carson and Langer (2006), Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (1999), Kabat-Zinn (1990) Morgan and Roemer (2015) and Toll (1999) will be utilized to provide perspectives on the process of acceptance of the present moment and the concept of, as previously mentioned, a maintenance of a nonjudgmental mindset in terms of the flow of thoughts (and at times bodily sensations) that occur moment to moment, in relationship to the processes of mindfulness practice.

The definition of acceptance is "experientially open" to the reality of the present moment rather than being in a state of either certainty or uncertainty or judging what is just or unjust (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Acceptance involves a conscious choice to abandon one's itinerary to have a different experience and an active method of "allowing" the flow of current thoughts, feeling and sensations (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999). Tolle (1999) affirmed that in giving "fullest attention to whatever the moment presents ... implies that you also completely accept what is, because you cannot give your full attention to something and at the same time resist it" (p. 56).

Acceptance occurs when one decides to have the willingness and attitude to view a situation in the present moment; it is this attitude that sets the stage for acting appropriately in

your life, no matter what is happening (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). You are more likely to know what to do and have the inner confidence to act when you have a clear picture of what is happening than when your vision is “clouded” by your mind’s self-serving judgments and desires or its suspicions and preconceptions (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

The aim of mindfulness practice is to expand one’s ability to notice when the mind wanders and when one becomes involved in the usual pattern of criticism or judgment and to provide more occasions to practice returning to the present moment with acceptance (Morgan & Roemer, 2015). Mindfulness by definition incorporates a state of “self-acceptance” as the emphasis of mindful attention is on acceptance and assessment of the present experience rather than on “self-evaluation and self-criticism” (Carson & Langer, 2006, p.31).

Upon review of the literature on the concept of acceptance and non-judgmental observation in relationship to the process of mindfulness practice, there appears to be a consensus among the referenced authors, in that, to actually experience the present moment one has to do so with a clear, open mind and non-judgmental attitude which embraces the concept of acceptance of what has occurred at that moment. The literature cited in this discussion focused on an individual's ability to practice experiential acceptance, in a non-judgmental manner, in the present moment.

WHAT IS MINDLESSNESS?

The concept of mindfulness and the correlated concept of mindlessness were introduced to social psychology more than two decades ago (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness and Mindlessness have been applied to numerous various areas, including psychopathology, developmental psychology, education research, political theory and communication processes (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). The references of Carson and Langer (2006), Langer (1989) and

Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) will be used in the discussion to contrast the elements of mindfulness with mindlessness as our discussion moves towards an area in which the societal experiences and behaviors of mindlessness are addressed, as these experiences and behaviors impact the process of mindfulness.

Carson and Langer provide a description of the differences that may occur in terms of the concept of perspective when one views experiences in the spirit of mindfulness versus mindlessness.

The hallmarks of the mindful condition are (1) the ability to view both objects and situations from multiple perspectives and (2) capacity to shift perspective depending upon context. Mindful cognition typically is guided by rules and routines but not *governed* by them. In contrast, mindlessness is a state of rigidity in which one adheres to a single perspective and acts automatically. When one is mindless, one is trapped in a rigid mindset and is oblivious to context or perspective. The mindless condition pigeonholes experiences, behaviors objects, and other people into rigid categories. Mindless thought-processing and behavior are governed by rules, routines, and previously constructed categories (2006, p. 30).

Upon review of the previously referenced literature from the discussions on *What is Mindfulness? Mindfulness Defined and the Processes of Mindfulness Practice* the concept of mindfulness appeared to be one in which an individual is the center in an experiential situation. The individual utilizes the cultivated skills of the processes of mindfulness practice, to manage the situation, mindfully. In any situation one must use mindfulness skills, such as attention to one's breath (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p.18), intentionally paying attention to the present moment nonjudgmentally (Parker et al., 2015, p. 226) to view situations from multiple perspectives (Carson & Langer, 2006) and the development of a conscious stance of acceptance (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson 1999). All of these mindfulness characteristics were reviewed in the discussion and were in the above-cited work from Carson and Langer (2006, p.30).

However, how does one interact with other individuals in experiential situations in which the individual's behaviors and the elements in the environment are not mindful?

What is imperative to note about the Carson and Langer (2006, p.30) discussion on mindlessness is the introduction of mindless societal interactions which places "behaviors, objects and other people into rigid categories" (2006). Although one has conditioned one's self to manage mindfully experiential situations, the test of adherence to one's mindfulness practice comes when one experiences a challenge in a situation as mentioned by Carson and Langer (2006), in which individuals who are governed by mindsets that are rigid and based on mindless categorizations.

Another manner in which mindlessness can be exhibited is through premature cognitive commitments (Langer, 1989). These experiences occur when we develop a mindset on an initial encounter, without reflection, to something or someone until we encounter that something or someone at a future time (Langer, 1989). The mindless individual is committed to a fixed use of information; the utilization of alternative perspectives are not considered (Langer, 1989). Prejudice and stereotyping are caused directly by mindlessness (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Damaging "collective choices" that involve discrimination can become commonplace categorizations based on the mindless attitudes of "intergroup" individuals (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

By not practicing the concept of drawing distinctions or "making novel distinctions" we may arbitrarily place individuals in categories based on, for example, "skin color or accent" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). However, when one views each object, situation and most importantly person, distinctively we may realize that the "stereotypes" we once formed (which

are generally dictated by an authority figure at a younger age and remained present within one's thought processes) are not based in reality but by choice (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

This discussion will be divided into four sections which will include the perceived mechanisms of meditation, a definition of what is meditation, the processes of meditation and a brief discussion on the neurobiology of meditation. This discussion is also an attempt to view the differences of the mechanisms and processes of meditation from the mechanisms and processes of mindfulness; however, the differences are very subtle, as indicated in the literature.

It should be noted that much of the literature appeared to be related to *mindfulness meditation*, in which the two disciplines are combined as one. It is well known that the discipline of meditation can be utilized with other practices besides mindfulness, such as prayer, yoga, transcendental or Zen meditation. It also appeared that these processes are interchangeable for these practices. In this section, the word *discipline* is used in conjunction with the practice of meditation because of the strong theme of intentionality; many of the authors made this connection.

THE PERCEIVED MECHANISMS OF MEDITATION

Davidson & Lutz (2008), Langer (1989), Novak (2003), Posner and Peterson (1990), and Dass (1971) spoke of the possible mechanisms of meditation, which comes before the benefits experienced during the process stages of meditation. When one thinks of the term mechanism, you may think of the mechanics of a system, in that one thing begets another for the full operation to occur. For example, the mechanics that go into the creation of a fine luxury car could be considered one of the mechanisms that add to the operation of that car. The above authors discussed how certain mechanisms of mindfulness have to occur to possibly later benefit

from the stages of meditation (or the experience of the smoothness and comfort of the ride of the luxury car).

Let's begin this part of the discussion with a simple invitation and instructions to find a space for stillness. One should create a quiet corner in your home, a launching pad to the infinite, a meditation seat (Dass, 1971). Create a seat in which you can sit comfortably with spine straight out; turn off your body (Dass, 1971). In this corner establish a regular ritual "for purification, for reflection, for calming the mind, just as water wears away the stone, so daily *sadhana* (daily spiritual practice) will thin the vial of ignorance" (Dass, 1971, p.99-100). Perhaps, while in this seated position one can focus attention on a chosen object and begin the mechanism of mindfulness as discussed by Davidson and Lutz (2008).

Focused Attention (FA) and Open Monitoring (OM) meditation are two forms of meditation (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). FA meditation involves deliberate, focused attention on a chosen object in a continued manner, and OM meditation comprises of non-reactivity, monitoring the content of experience from moment to moment, mainly as a means to identify the nature of emotional and cognitive structures (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). Davidson and Lutz further stated that as OM meditation involves the use of FA training to calm the mind and reduce distractions, but FA advances the cultivation and the monitoring skill per se become the main focus of practice (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). The main aim is to reach a state in which an explicit focus on a specific object is retained; instead, one remains only in the monitoring state, attentive moment - by - moment to anything that arises in experience (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). It should be noted that these two mutual methods are frequently joined, whether in a single session or over the course of a practitioner's training (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). "These methods are found with

some deviation in multiple meditation structures and are implemented in many popular secular interventions that draw on Buddhist practices” (Davidson & Lutz, 2008, p. 2).

Throughout Focused Attention meditation, diverting external actions as well as memories or thoughts about future events represent conflicts to task goals (Posner & Peterson, 1990). These are unnoticed while the practitioner concentrates on the meditation object such as the breath, body sensations, thoughts, emotions, a mantra or visualization (Posner & Peterson, 1990). Sustaining the focus of attention on a chosen object, while discounting distractions, is referred to as conflict monitoring, or executive attention (Posner & Peterson, 1990).

Langer mentioned that in meditation, the mind becomes quieter and progressive thought is “discouraged” (1989). In some forms of meditation, thoughts and images that come to mind are considered insignificant and are surrendered as soon as one becomes aware of their presence (Langer, 1989). Various meditation traditions stress the need to cultivate attention regulation early in the practice (Smith & Novak, 2003). Focused attention is often recommended before advancement to other forms of meditation; the focus is generally on the cultivation of positive emotions (Smith & Novak, 2003). The general instruction for a focused attention meditation in the mindfulness meditation practice is as follows: “Focus your entire attention on your incoming and outgoing breath and start again” (Smith & Novak, 2003, p. 77).

The contributions of Davidson & Lutz, Posner & Peterson, Langer, Smith & Novak, and Dass indicated that the core meditative mechanisms are very similar. When in the discipline of meditation one focuses the attention of a particular object which is usually the breath and the sensations of the breath. Simultaneously, your attention is momentarily and continuously redirected to the monitoring of thoughts that come and go in one’s mind; attention regulation

may be useful at this time. Once again, the goal is to return to the focused attention object, which is usually – the breath.

A DEFINITION OF MEDITATION

Kabat- Zinn and Sterner individually provide a definition of meditation – The more detailed definition of meditation provided by Kabat-Zinn in comparison with the simpler definition by Sterner sets the framework for the discussion of the process of meditation. Kabat-Zinn’s mention of wholeness, self-observation, right inward measure, non-judgmental and Sterner’s mention of contemplative processes, enhanced awareness and object focus (on the “God Force”) seemed to indicate that the process of meditation has a restorative property to create “wholeness” within one’s self, from that which is fragmented, chaotic and distorted within our day to day lives.

The concept of wholeness is found not only in the meaning of the words health and healing (and of course the word holy). We also find it embedded in the deep significance of the word meditation and medicine, words that are obviously related to each other in some way. According to renowned polymath David Bohm, a theoretical physicist whose work involved exploring wholeness as a fundamental property of nature, the words *medicine* and *meditation* come from the Latin *mederi* which means “to cure” *Mederi* itself derives from an earlier Indo-European root meaning “to measure” The concept of measure has another ancient, more platonic meaning. This is the notion that all things have in Bohm’s words their own “right inward measure” that makes them what they are, that gives them their properties. Medicine, seen in light, is basically the means by which right inward measure is restored when it is disturbed by disease, illness or injury. Meditation by the same token is the process of perceiving directly the right inward measure of one’s own being through careful, non-judgmental self-observation. Right inward measure, in this context, is another way of saying wholeness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 188.).

Meditation is not a religion. However, historically it has been practically a part of all leading faiths. Once again historically most leading religions have embedded a contemplation process to enhance awareness of the “God force” or whatever you chose to call it. Nothing is frightening about meditation. If one decides to practice you will

discover that you will happily anticipate meditation due to the calming sense and clarity it brings to your life (Sterner, 2005, p. 113).

THE PERCEIVED PROCESSES OF MEDITATION

Dass (1971), Goldstein (2013), Hanh (1975), Kabat-Zinn (1994), Langer (1989), Williams (2000) and Yates (2015) discussed the concept of the experienced, perceived processes that may occur while one is in a state of meditation. Meditation is the process that you use to find space and freedom (Williams, 2000). With practice, meditation uncovers that openness and calm that is inside of you (Williams, 2000). Because your mind becomes less chaotic and you are not “tripping over your desires, you can walk with ease; it is from here that you can live your life with grace” (Williams, 2000, p.125). William notes that meditation involves the establishment of “single-pointed awareness” (2000). To comprehend how the mind works you want to cultivate total concentration and awareness; we will then envision reality, “we will know the nature of all things” (Williams, 2000, p. 125). The awareness, that acknowledgment that comes from our own lived experience, is the ultimate “key to mastering life” (Williams, 2000, p. 125). Williams noted that the differences that happen in your perception when you advance your capacity to concentrate are based on a modification in the manner in which you utilize your brain (2000).

Hanh supports Williams statement, the objective of meditation goes deeper than relaxation, however, when one reaches a state of relaxation other processes may occur, such as the awareness of a “tranquil heart and a clear mind is to have gone the path of meditation” (1975, p. 35). To be able to “take hold” of our minds and calm our thoughts, we have to practice mindfulness of the mind (Hanh, 1975). As you began to calm your mind through meditation, you become increasingly aware of the forces that act upon you, forces within as well as outside of

your body (Dass, 1971). In the past, you may have sought stimulation. However, you are now drawn towards situations in which there is less stimulation (Dass, 1971).

You must learn how to notice and identify the presence of every feeling and thought which surges in you (Hanh, 1975). “If you desire to know your own mind there is only one manner to do so: you must learn to detect and to identify everything about it”; this must be done at all times during your day to day existence no less than during the hour of meditation (Hanh, 1975, p. 38). Hanh explains the experience of the meditative process in connection with the before mentioned (Davidson & Lutz, 2015) extensive monitoring discussion, which may occur during the mechanism stage of meditation.

When feelings or thoughts pass naturally from the mind, the objective is not to chase it away, hate it, worry about it or be frightened by it. So, what precisely should you do regarding such thoughts and feelings – simply acknowledge their presence. The essential thing is not to let any feelings or thoughts occur without distinguishing it in mindfulness (Hanh, 1975, p. 38).

Above all, meditation is about allowing the mind to be as it is and knowing something about how it is at this moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Meditation does involve “energy and commitment” to feel a sense of progress (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.34). It is the concept of “intentionality” that enables one to even focus for five minutes; “to make meditation a part of your life requires discipline” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). You have to release what you think and expect is going to happen, let go of your expectations and just watch (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Langer’s further stated that, in Eastern interpretation, the appropriate meditation methods are said to result in a state that has been termed – *de-automatization* (1989). When in this state old groupings are dismantled, and the individual is no longer confined by “stereotypes” (Langer, 1989). Langer mentioned the concept of *de-automatization* with an indication that the seasoned meditator

cultivates the ability to view thoughts that enter the mind from an entirely different perspective. This idea was also mentioned by Williams (2000) in which she discussed how one's perceptions are different as a result of advanced concentration, which in turn is the product of advanced meditation practice. This perception of the possibilities as to how to view these thoughts, is similar to Langer's own discussion in the *What is Mindfulness* section in which she spoke of novel perspectives and that of Kabat-Zinn (1994) and Hanh (1975) in this discussion – give acknowledgement of the thoughts that come into the mind when in meditation in a non-judgmental manner and then return to the discipline of meditation. However, from Langer's (1989) and Williams (2000) view - a process occurs over time, for the advanced meditator regarding perception of these thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, there are many seminaries to the processes of meditation as was stated by Williams (2000) when she spoke of the concept of “single-pointed awareness,” which is connected to the achievement of certain higher levels of concentration when in the midst of the meditative process. The discussion of Davidson and Lutz (2008) in connection with “focused attention” and “open monitoring” shared some of the components noted by Goldstein on the topic to be discussed which involves the concept of “one-pointedness” (2013).

The Pali word for concentration is Samadhi, and it refers to two different but connected activities of the mind: the mental factor of one-pointedness and the meditative states of concentration (Goldstein, 2013). One-pointedness helps to combine all of the different features of the mind on a sole object (Goldstein, 2013). When one-pointedness is strong, we are “undistracted, and we feel this non-distraction as peace both in our meditation practice and in our lives” (Goldstein, 2013 p. 266). The second meaning of Samadhi is more universal and comprises of the whole range of meditative states of concentration (Goldstein, 2013). This new

broad meaning is not constrained only to the factor of one-pointedness, but also includes other related factors in the development of concentration, such as: “rapture or calm, happiness or equanimity” (Goldstein, 2013, p. 267).

Finally, Yates et al. discuss the concept of the mechanism of “focused attention” similar to that stated by Davidson and Lutz (2008), Posner and Peterson (1990) and Novak (2003) in combination with some of the before mentioned processes of meditation discussed by Dass (1971), Hanh (1975) Kabat-Zinn (1994) and Williams (2000).

A meditation object is something you intentionally chose to focus your attention on during meditation (Yates et al., 2015). The breath is best for “cultivating attention and mindfulness” the authors further stated that the breath is always with you (Yates et al., 2015). “You can meditate on the breath at any opportunity, wherever you are, every day – even up to your dying breath” (Yates, 2015, p. 46). The breath also changes over time, becoming weaker as concentration develops; this makes it appropriate for the development of pronounced attention since the particulars you focus on can be made more progressive as sensations grow less unrelated (Yates et al., 2015).

It is well known that the changes of sensations are never-ending “moment to moment which is beneficial to insight into the nature of impermanence” (Yates et al. 2015, p. 46). In connection to the breath as the meditation object, the focus should be on the “sensations” in relationship to the breath, for example, the sensation of movement, pressure, and touch that occurs (in the chest or abdomen) as you breathe in and out (Yates et al. 2015).

Another example is when breathing during meditation is to try to experience the sensation of “the temperature, pressure and air moving on the tip of the nose, the rim, inside the nostrils, or on the upper lip just below the nostrils” (Yates, et al., 2015 p. 46-47).

In the next section Greeson (2008) with support from multiple authors and Zeidan (2014) discussed the neurobiological impact that long-term meditation practice has in some parts of the brain, most notably the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the prefrontal cortex (PFC). It appears that long-term meditation practice may enhance attention, concentration and emotional regulation.

THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF MEDITATION

Holzel et al. (2007b) state that there are multiple research projects that use brain imagery to explore the effects of meditation practices on the brain; it has been noted that increased rostral anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex PFC (these parts of the brain are associated with attention, concentration, and emotion) initiation may reflect stronger processing of distraction of events and emotion respectively (Greeson, 2008). Zeidan's work mirrors Greeson. He states that mindfulness meditation is linked to higher-order brain mechanisms such as PFC and ACC at initial phases of mental training (2014). It should be noted that at early phases of mindfulness meditation training and development, novices participate in brain mechanisms supporting an effortful "top-down" regulation of low level afferent proceeding indicated by greater activation in the PFC and ACC and deactivation of the thalamus and amygdala brain regions involved in early stages of sensory and emotional processing respectively (Zeidan, 2014).

Huscherson, Seppla and Gross (2008) point to another study conducted through the use of brain imagery which found that a momentary session of Loving Kindness meditation as defined by Kabat-Zinn (1990) and the Dali Lama (2001) is a contemplative practice designed to foster acceptance and compassion for oneself and others, activated regions of the brain which are

connected with positive feelings towards others (Greeson, 2008). Lutz et al. (2008b) suggested that studies have indicated that more meditation proficiency is related to an increased ability to experience shifts in brain activity associated with positive emotions like compassion (Greeson, 2008).

Lutz et al. (2008b) state that it appears that largely, focused concentration meditation practices can increase one's ability to sustain fixed attention on a selected object, like the breath or another person, however open awareness meditation practices intensifies an individual's capability to openly monitor and redirect attention when it becomes distracted (Greeson, 2008). "Based on these findings, not only is it possible to train the mind to change the brain but in fact, one's ability to do so may get stronger as one gains meditation experience." (Greeson, 2008 p. 4). As the meditator becomes more skilled at attending to sensory and emotional experiences without interpretation or elaboration, a decoupling between brain mechanisms supporting appraisal of sensory processing develops, as indicated by decreases in higher-order brain activity (PFC) and increase in sensory processes brain regions such as the - anterior insula, somatosensory cortices (Zeidan, 2014). Zeidan also proposes that dynamic changes in brain structure are associated with extensive training in mindfulness meditation and higher levels of dispositional mindfulness (2014).

In summary, due to the underrepresentation of qualitative studies on the topic of African American men who practice mindfulness meditation as a method to buffer psychosocial stress, it was necessary to review the literature on mindfulness and meditation to present a view of the two practices and/or disciplines. The content of the literature review will be examined in comparison to the retrospective mindfulness meditation experiences of the participants in the *Findings Chapter*.

The section- *What is Mindfulness, What is Meditation?* gave a historical perspective of the origins of mindfulness and the benefits of the practice of mindfulness (e.g. awareness, attentiveness, the enhancement of the skill to view situations from multiple perspectives) and the benefits of meditation (e.g. focus, discipline and enhanced concentration) are viewed as a constant of the practice, just as well as the disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors that indirectly or directly impact many African American men are seen as a constant of American society.

Within the content of the Literature Review section author Maex references a scripture from the Kalama Sutta, in which Buddha in his travels, speaks to the people of a small village in terms of choice of what to believe (in terms of dogma and religion), he states that “only when you see for yourself that a practice leads to suffering or well-being then you should either reject or accept it” (2011, p.168). It is from this statement that one could conceptualize the past and current disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors that directly and indirectly impact African American men as *suffering* and, if one decides to choose the mindfulness meditation as a possible means to buffer this suffering.

The next chapter will provide an explanation of three theories which will be utilized as the Theoretical Framework: Self-determination Theory, Erik Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT).

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation is to view if the retrospective mindfulness meditation experiences of the African American male participants acted as a buffer against the disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors that may have directly or indirectly impacted the obtainment of a consistent level of well-being.

In this chapter, three developmental theories will be explained. Later, segments and portions of these theories will be discussed as a possible link to the experiences of the participants in the *Theoretical Linkage of the Themes* section. The theories that will be used in an effort to explain the relationship of the above-mentioned components are - Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (the fourth stage), and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT).

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an approach to human motivation, personality, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2001). SDT uses common empirical methods with the engagement of an organismic meta-theory that stresses the importance of the evolved internal sources of human personality development and behavioral self-regulation (Ryan, Kuhl & Deci, 1997). Deci and Ryan (1985) are responsible for the introduction of one of the most in-depth accounts of self-determination as a theoretical concept. SDT suggests that biological, developmental and social factors have both close and distant influences on the development of autonomy; the knowledge of insightful self-confirmation of an action, in turn, impacts behavioral regulation, personality, integration and life-span development (Deci & Ryan, 2000b).

The principal emphasis of exploration within self-determination theory is centered on motivation, which is divided into two types (intrinsic and extrinsic) they have different results for development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). The concept of human motivation was historically and routinely framed as a single model that varied in amount instead of type, as noted by Hull (1943). However, one of the key aspects that emerged from the research of Deci & Ryan is that the kind of motivation has shown to be of greater influence as opposed to the amount of motivation (2008).

The explanation of the various components of SDT will involve a review of the following: a definition of Self-Determination Theory, the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; a review of the meta-theory: The Organismic viewpoint; a brief discussion of SDT's formal five mini-theories; a review of the Three Basic Psychological Needs (in relationship to competence, relatedness and autonomy); and finally a review of the role of autonomy and awareness in connection to mindfulness.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY DEFINED

One of the central components of Self-determination Theory (SDT) is based on the individual's choice of actions and interactions within his environment and how he chooses to maneuver himself in that environment. Based on SDT we have an innate, natural or organismic ability to seek out different or novel experiences and to strive to become competent within these new found experiences. The key principle of SDT is the concept of *choice* and the type of motivation (either intrinsic or extrinsic) connected to our decision making processes, as we make these choices in life. Deci and Ryan expand on this premise.

Self-determination is a quality of human function that includes the experience of choice, in other words, the experience of an internal perceived locus of causality. It is integral to intrinsically motivated behavior and is also evidence in some extrinsically motivated behaviors. Stated differently, self-determination is the capacity to choose and to have those choices, rather than reinforcement contingencies, drives, or any other forces or pressures, be the determinants of one's actions. But self-determination is more than a *capacity*; it is also a *need*. We have posited a basic, innate propensity to be self-determining that leads organisms to engage in interesting behaviors, which typically has the benefit of developing competencies, and of working toward a flexible space with the social environment. This tendency toward adequate accommodation in the service of one's self-determination is central to the development of extrinsic motivation. The psychosocial hallmark of self-determination is flexibility in the management of the interactions between oneself and the environment. When self-determined, one acts out of choice rather than obligation or coercion and those choices are based on an awareness of one's organismic needs and a flexible interpretation of external events. Self-determination often involves controlling one's environment or one's outcomes, but it may also involve choosing to give up control (Deci & Ryan, p. 38, 1985).

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Deci & Ryan's *conceptualized* definition of self-determination places at its core intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan state that *intrinsic motivation* is based on the innate, organismic needs for competence and self-determination (1985). Intrinsic needs vary from principal drives in that they are "not based on tissue deficits" and they "do not operate cyclically" for example, "breaking into awareness," asserting to be fulfilled and then when fulfilled, withdrawing into inactivity (Deci & Ryan, p. 32, 1985). Like drives, however, intrinsic needs are innate to the human organism and function as an essential stimulant of behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Additionally, intrinsic motivation may interact with drives in the sense of intensifying or diminishing drives and/ or affecting the way in which people fulfill their drives (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy is said to be essential to the development and substance of intrinsically

motivated actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). Intrinsic motivation can also be viewed as the “inherent inclination to pursue novelty and challenges to extend and exercise one’s capacities to search, and to learn” (Deci & Ryan, p. 70. 2000b) “The intrinsic need for competence and self-determination motivate a continued progression of pursuing and trying to overcome optimal challenges” (Deci & Ryan, p. 32, 1985).

The completion of an action for the purpose to “attain some separable” result is characterized as *extrinsic motivation*. This is the opposite of the outcome of intrinsic motivation which refers to the completion of activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself, as previously noted (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). In contrast to some viewpoints that clarify extrinsically motivated behavior as constantly non-autonomous, SDT suggests that extrinsic motivation can differ significantly in its relationship to autonomy (Ryan & Connell 1989; Vallerand, 1997).

An example of autonomy in connection with extrinsic motivation would be - students who do their homework because they personally understand its importance to their selected career are extrinsically motivated, as are the students who do the homework only because they are following their parents’ rules, regulations and controls (Heider, 1958). Both illustrations contain instrumentalities as opposed to the pleasure of completion of the work itself, yet the former circumstance of extrinsic motivation requires personal validation and feelings of choice, whereas the latter comprises of compliance with an external regulation (Heider, 1958). The former without a doubt, is the type of extrinsic motivation that is considered intelligent, smart socialization that would be appropriate regardless of the applied setting (Heider, 1958).

META-THEORY: THE ORGANISMIC VIEWPOINT

SDT is an organismic dialectical methodology (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). It proposes that people are “active organism” with natural developmental, advanced capabilities that enable them to overcome and transcend above a multitude of challenges and incorporate new experiences into a vibrant and clear sense of self and connect or integrate themselves into the larger societal groups (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). The life force of these developmentally advanced capabilities is intrinsic motivation (Blasi, 1976). These natural developmental capabilities do not, however, function routinely, but instead, demand constant “social nutrients” and supports (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). The social environment with all of its systems has two choices to make, in terms of the person who desires to utilize these vibrant and clear capabilities of the sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000a).

The social environment can either support or obstruct the natural inclinations toward active societal engagement and psychological growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Therefore, it is the dialectic between the live organism and the social environment that is the foundation for SDT’s expectations about behavior, experience, and development (Deci & Ryan, 2000a).

Contained within the model of SDT, the nutrients that are needed for the cultivation of healthy growth and purpose are indicated by the concept of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). Consequently, SDT stipulates that in order to work towards the achievement of constant and consistent mental health, three innate psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy must be aligned, promoted and supported by the societal systems (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). When these psychological needs are fulfilled the emergence of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, mental health and well-being are satisfied, which in turn positively benefits human existence (Deci & Ryan, 2000b).

SDT's Five Mini-Theories

Self-Determination Theory has been established and researched through a set of five mini-theories, which mutually encompass the structure of the theory (Ryan, 2009). “Each mini-theory was initially introduced to explain phenomena that emerged from experimental and/or field research on factors affecting human motivation and optimal functioning” (Ryan, p.1, 2009).

1. *Cognitive Evaluation Theory* (CET) explains how social contexts and interpersonal interactions either assist or damage intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koester & Ryan 1999). CET precisely notes how factors such as rewards, deadlines feedback, and pressure affect feelings of autonomy and competence and thus assist or damage intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koester & Ryan, 1999).
2. *Organismic Integration Theory* (OIT) views the exercise of internalization of many extrinsic motives (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). OIT further proposes that internalization and integration are reinforced by contextual supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). OIT indicates that individuals are inclined to internalize and integrate a practice or value if they experience choice in association with it (Deci & Ryan, 2000b).
3. *Causality Orientation Theory* (COT) defines specific modifications in how people adjust to different aspects of the environment in regulating behavior (Ryan, 2006). When autonomy-oriented, a person adjusts to what interest them and acts with similarity (Ryan, 2006). When control-oriented, a person predominantly regulates behavior by adjustment to social control and reward contingencies and when interpersonally-oriented a person concentrates on their lack of personal control or competence (Ryan, 2006).

4. *Basic Psychological Needs Theory* (BPNT) focuses on the perception of basic needs by relating them directly to wellness (Ryan, 2006). BPNT postulates that each need utilizes independent efforts on wellness; it appears that the influence of any behavior or incident on well-being is mainly a role of its relation with need satisfaction (Ryan, 2006).

“Research shows that aggregate need satisfaction predicts individual differences in health and wellness, as well as within a person fluctuations in wellness across time” (Ryan, 2006, p. 2).

5. *Goal Content Theory* (GCT) Research in the area of need satisfaction has indicated that materialism and other extrinsic goals such as fame or image do not deepen need satisfaction and it does not affect well-being, even when one is effective at achieving them (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Niemiec et al. 2009). However, aims such as close relationships, personal growth, or giving back to one’s community are beneficial to need satisfaction and henceforth enable health and wellness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

GCT is also related to how goals are structured; it has been proven that goals structure for the creation of intrinsic objectives is more likely to be followed through than those centered on extrinsic results (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). SDT proposes that people (men, women, cultures that are collectivist or individualist) experience more stability and consistency with their mental health in a positive realm when their behavior is autonomous as opposed to controlled (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim & Kaplan, 2003).

THE THREE BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF – AUTONOMY, COMPETENCE AND RELATEDNESS

Of the five SDT Mini-Theories, the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) discussed the obtainment of well-being as its key element, which is also a component of this discussion and therefore requires a closer view. Vansteenkiste and Ryan explained the concept of BPNT as a need satisfaction which if not supported will lead to need frustration (2013). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been determined to be psychological needs that must be satisfied (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). For a further clarification of the SDT the three psychological needs satisfactions are necessary: *competence* refers to the experience of a sense of effectiveness in interacting with one's environment (White, 1959); *relatedness* satisfaction concerns the experience of love and care of significant others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985); and lastly *autonomy* refers to the experience of volition and the self-endorsement of one's activity (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

SDT postulates that these three psychological needs add to “proactivity, integration and well-being, the frustration of these same psychological needs, especially from significant caregivers, leaves one open to passivity, fragmentation and ill-being” (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013 p. 263). SDT supports that while human beings have the natural propensity to seek progression and growth under need-supportive situations, “they are also at risk for defensive functioning when exposed to controlling, critical or rejecting social contexts that are environments that thwart these psychological needs” (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013 p. 264). Therefore, need satisfaction and need frustration are considered to be a vital element in both peak and non-peak functioning (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

THE ROLE OF AUTONOMY AND AWARENESS IN CONNECTION TO MINDFULNESS

As was previously discussed, the environment has to be conducive to the core psychological needs satisfaction of an individual in order to obtain a functional level of well-being, within a certain space and time. However, as was also discussed one's environment does not have to acquiesce to an individual's basic psychological needs, which will most likely create conflict in that person's life in terms of obtainment of well-being. According to SDT, there are resilience factors that can be cultivated as safeguards against social environmental factors that are not conducive to the obtainment of a healthy well-being. Vansteenkiste and Ryan stated that "among these resilience factors is the capacity to regulate behavior autonomously, even under threat or pressure; this capability, in turn, is supported by awareness or mindfulness" (2013, p. 272).

To further elaborate on the connection of autonomy, awareness, and mindfulness, SDT has long suggested that autonomous regulation depends on a pure awareness of what is happening in that present moment (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Studies have been conducted by Brown and Ryan, which have indicated that *mindfulness*, defined as open and receptive awareness, is characteristic of features associated with autonomy (2003). It should be noted that substantial research has connected mindfulness with heightened autonomy and self-regulation, with their related benefits (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007). People have described when mindful, "they act more autonomous and manifest lower defensiveness" (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013, p.274). And finally, SDT proposes that developmental components that hinder basic needs are conducive to an antagonistic affect-prone mindset unwelcoming to the open and receptive mindfulness (Ryan, 2005).

ERIK ERIKSON'S STAGES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Erik Erikson was a principally exceptional ego psychologist who examined how the ego sustains consistency over the course of an average expectable human life cycle (Berzoff, Melano-Flanagan & Hertz, 2011). He theorized that the ego itself is formed and transformed not only by biological and psychological forces but also by social forces (Berzoff, Melano-Flanagan & Hertz, 2011). Erikson was the first to cultivate a psychosocial theory, formed on Freud's classic psychosexual theory, but one that joined doctrines of ego psychology with Freud's epigenetic principles from drive theory (Berzoff, Melano-Flanagan & Hertz, 2011). Erikson extended the principles of psychological growth past childhood (Berzoff, Melano-Flanagan & Hertz, 2011). He related biological, erogenous zones with specific types of ego function and established how self and identity are biologically, psychologically and socially connected (Berzoff, Melano-Flanagan & Hertz, 2011).

Erikson proposed the concept of "epigenesis" to express that human development unfolds from part to whole, with elements of the chronologically appropriate ability or personality feature progressively emerging in a prescribed sequence until the purposeful whole was achieved (Erikson, 1950). He saw this emergence as an occurrence within an interactional and adaptive framework, within which the individual develops through interactional adaptation to the immediate social environmental as well as to the larger society, culture and historical context (Smith-Osborne, 2007). Therefore, Erikson suggested that reciprocated receptiveness on the part of both the individual and society was necessary for definitive development (Smith-Osborne, 2007).

The epigenetic structure is needed as a guide for the different variables of each developmental stage: 1.) the psychosocial crisis suggested by social interaction, which is in turn

advanced and required by newly developed drives and capacities and the precise psychosocial strength originating from the resolution of the crisis; 2.) the exact sense of separation stimulated at each stage and its connection with some key form of psychopathology; 3.) the distinct correlation between all of these dynamics and certain essential social institutions (Erikson, 1950).

The life cycle stages are seen as age-related periods of life described by anticipated structures, crisis (as mentioned above) and changes and leads into a succeeding stage (Smith-Osborne, 2007). Freud and Erikson theorized stages as rigid, in that their sequence was unwavering and defined peak mature development, was associated with specific tensions/conflicts and a precondition, in that each stage must be worked through and the associated conflicts resolved before successful movement to the next stage could be achieved (Smith-Osborne, 2007).

Erikson (1950, 1959, 1966, 1968a & 1968b) suggested eight stages of psychosocial development that humans experience throughout the life cycle (Ochse & Plug, 1986). The first stage which parallels with the first year of life is necessary for the development of trust versus mistrust and the second stage, which transpires in the second year for autonomy versus shame and doubt (Ochse & Plug, 1986). Between the ages of 3 to 5 years is a critical period for the development of initiative versus guilt and from age 6 to 12 for the development of industry versus inferiority (Ochse & Plug, 1986). The decisive stage for identity-formation versus identity- diffusion materializes in adolescent and for intimacy versus isolation in early adulthood, 20-25 years of age (Ochse & Plug, 1986). The years from age 25-60 represent the critical period for the development of generativity versus stagnation, and the final stage of integrity versus despair is experienced in old age (Ochse & Plug, 1986).

The developmental stage of Industry versus Inferiority will also be discussed in greater detail as a developmental stage that was noted by the research participants as a stage in which vital emotional mental and social energy could have been reutilized.

INDUSTRY VERSUS INFERIORITY (6 YEARS OF AGE TO 12 YEARS OF AGE)

One of the major elements during this stage is the necessity for children to spend time alone in play. This time can enhance their imagination and creativity; the reading of books, games, movies and music add to heighten the quality of this period alone in play (Erikson, 1980). Eventually, through time, these alone periods will become monotonous and unfulfilling and slowly evolve into the productivity of play and another task (Erikson, 1980).

Socially, this is the most influential stage: since it comprises of doing things independently and in a group with others, “a first sense of division of labor and of deferential opportunity that is a sense of *technological ethos* of a culture”, are cultivated during this stage (Erikson, 1950, p. 260). As a review of the previous stages, “one might say the personality at the first stage develops around the belief “I am what I am given,” and that of the second, “I am what I will.” The third can be characterized by “I am what I imagine I will be.” We must now approach the fourth: “*I am what I learn.*” The child now wants to be shown how to get busy with something and how to be busy with others” (Erikson, 1980, p.87). I call this a *sense of industry*. He develops industry; that is, he regulates himself to the rules of a productive situation (Erikson, 1980). He realizes that he can become an interested and engaged entity of a productive situation. To bring a productive situation to a completion is a goal that progressively replaces the impulses

of play (Erikson, 1950). He cultivates the desire of work accomplishment by fixed attention and determined diligence (Erikson, 1980).

The danger of this stage is a sense of *inadequacy and inferiority*; this may be due to an unsatisfactory result to the previous conflict (Erikson, 1980). Other factors that may present a problem in this stage is: the child still desires to be with his mother as opposed to learning new concepts; he may want the continued individualized attention from home as opposed to the type of collective attention that will be provided at school (Erikson, 1980). On the other side, he may possibly be able to exceed in ways which are undeveloped and which, if not encouraged now, may develop late or never (Erikson, 1980).

RELATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY (RCT)

Relational-cultural theory was embedded in the innovative work of Jean Baker Miller, a psychiatrist, who suggested a new understanding of human development in her book *Towards a New Psychology of Women* [1976], (Comstock et al., 2008). Relational-cultural theory was created due to the social and political disconnection of women in the core of American society. RCT is formed on the proposition that during the life span, “human beings grow through and towards connection” (Jordan, 2009, p.1). The theory embraces the concept that we as humans beings need connections to help us move towards the process of maturity, “even to stay alive” (Jordan, 2009, p.1). A major foundation of pain for people is living in alienation and isolation at either a personal or cultural level; this is termed disconnection which is also addressed in various forms in RCT (Jordan, 2009). Jordan (2000) states that the main ideas of RCT contain the following concepts:

1. People grow through and toward relationship throughout the life span.
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning.
3. Relational differentiation and elaboration characterize growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships.
6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit; development is not a one-way street.
7. One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span.

Additionally, RCT does not shy away from the need to modify the sociopolitical powers of disconnection that produce overwhelming suffering for people (Jordan, 2009). Over time, the concepts of the theory have been conceptualized to address the experiences of other groups (including African American men) who battle with non-acceptance or disconnection in American society (Jordan, 2009). Miller proposed that an absence of clarity of the background and relational experiences of women and people of color and marginalized men led many mental health professionals to pathologize these individuals by misinterpretation and lessening of how these vital aspects contribute to the psychological well-being of everyone (Robb, 2006).

To further explain the concepts of RCT the following principles of the theory will be discussed: mutual empathy and growth-fostering relationships (five good things), relational-cultural mindfulness, the neuroscience of relationship, connection and disconnection: social/cultural disconnection.

Mutual Empathy and Growth-fostering relationships:

RCT holds that in order to move towards the goals relational trust, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, the movement in the direction of separateness and independence must be eliminated (Jordan, 2009). The concept of mutual empathy and mutual empowerment is the fundamental progression towards growth in relationships (Jordan, 2009). RCT notes that this mutual empathy and empowerment can occur between two people or more (Jordan, 2009).

The opportunity for change may occur when each party observes the influence of the movement towards mutual empathy and empowerment on each other and the experience of the development of the growth-fostering relationship occurs along with a more “present and open” capacity for change (Jordan, 2009). The essential motivation in people’s lives is the need for connection, in which growth is primary (Jordan, 2009). “When in growth-fostering relationships, people are able to bring themselves most fully and authentically into connection (Jordan, 2009, p. 27).

Jean Miller proposes that these relationships have five conclusions, which are known as “the five good things”: a sense of zest; a better understanding of self, other and relationship (clarity); a sense of worth; an enhanced capacity to act or to be productive and an increased desire for more connection (Miller & Silver, 1997).

RELATIONAL CULTURAL MINDFULNESS

The principles of mindfulness have been integrated with RCT. Relational –cultural mindfulness is a particular kind of mindfulness that suggest we extend our awareness and attunement not just to the passing parade of images and thoughts in our minds and feelings in our

bodies, but that we bring the meditation attitude of presence to our relational worlds as well (Jordan, 2009). Especially in a culture that is replete with messages of “self-interest” and looking at the self, there needs to be an emphasis on bringing attention to the relational world and one’s community (Jordan, 2009)

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF RELATIONSHIP- CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION

RCT’s initial perception of the necessity for relational connections between human beings has been authenticated by recent studies in which MRIs had been used to examine brain structure and function (Jordan, 2009). It has been proposed through the discipline of neuroscience that “human beings are hardwired to connect” (Jordan, 2009, p. 20). Infants not only need physical nourishment from an accountable caretaker; that same infant will also not survive without emotional and neurological stimulation and growth (Jordan, 2009). When in relationship our brains develop, and it has been determined that in the absence of relationship neurons die (Chugani, 2001).

The research cited in an article written by Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004) entitled “Why it hurts to be left out?” provided confirmation that connection is paramount “not only to a person’s well-being but also for his or her overall health” (Banks, 2010, p.2). The findings of this article will be used to assist in the explanation of the neurobiological phenomena of the continual, necessity for human connection. An experiment was conducted in which three participants were involved in equal play with a computer game (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). The brain patterns of the subject participant, who was deliberately and progressively removed from the involvement in the game were examined (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004).

Brain imaging was conducted during the process in which the subject was being removed from playing the game to determine what parts of the brain were triggered by social rejection (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). It was determined that the subject experienced increased activity in the area of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex [ACC], as a result of being removed from the game. (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). The ACC is the location of the brain that records social pain along with rejection and the expectation of rejection; it is also the same place that records physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). From findings of the before mentioned experiment Eisenberger and Lieberman created the Social Pain Overlap Theory (SPOT theory) which purposes that social connections are so crucial to the health and well-being of humans that they share a neurological pathway with physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). It was further noted that the human body and mind does not distinguish the difference between physical pain and social rejection or alienation as far as the amount of stress placed on the body (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DISCONNECTION

Jordan responded to the findings by Eisenberger & Lieberman (2004), which aid in support of the social justice implications of RCT (2009). “Without connection, and a sense of being included, our well-being is endangered” (Jordan, 2009, p. 75). Jordan further states that the study has insightful social consequences; it conveys to us that “people who are marginalized, excluded or left out suffer real pain” (Jordan, 2009, p. 75)

It thus invites an appreciation that the pain of racism, homophobia, sexism, and all forms of social marginalization is real; racism, heterosexism, and classism not only silence and disempower, they also create real pain, which has a destructive impact on individuals (Jordan, 2009, p. 75).

A vital element of RCT is the acknowledgment that disconnections and the chance to engage in growth-fostering relationships happen at all levels – individual, familial and sociocultural (Jordan, 2009). RCT furthermore expands on the manner in which disconnections by “stratified” social organization and marginalization add to the knowledge of “immobilization and isolation” (Jordan, 2009, p. 5). Jordan reiterates that racism, homophobia, class prejudice and sexism all enable chronic disconnections that cause “pain and drain energy in individuals and societies” (Jordan, 2009, p.6). The social justice agenda of RCT examines the impact of dominance and subordination on groups and individual, including but not limited to women (Jordan, 2009). Walker and Miller state that, to express true feelings, one has to have the advantage of complete safety to be vulnerable; this is openly associated to how much mutuality exists in a relationship (2000). Privilege and marginalization transcend above the stratification of difference in culture; the dominant culture misrepresents images of self, images of other and images of relational opportunities in obstructing mutuality (Walker & Miller, 2000).

In summary, there are multiple commonalities between the three presented theories: Self-determination Theory (SDT), Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development (stage four) Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), in that the theories are developmental in nature and strong adult guidance and supports are needed for successful transition to the next level of development. And all of the theories compellingly stress that certain elements of a given societal environment need to be examined for the strong influences it has on the overall well-being of the individuals within that environment, especially if the sociopolitical environment does not connect or meet the psychological needs of the individuals who inhabit that environment.

As previously noted by the statistics listed in the *Introduction* section, many African American men are indirectly and directly impacted by a disproportionate amount of psychosocial

stressors. The experience of this chronic stress, throughout all of the stages of development, may most likely have an impact the well-being of many of these African American men. This negative impact, in turn, may also affect the individual's ability to connect with himself, his family and with American society, as this connection is associated with the concepts of productivity and purpose, within their chosen communities.

The frameworks of SDT, Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development and RCT all have a component that strongly acknowledges that - in order for an individual to experience a constant and consistent level of well-being, the societal environment in which he inhabits must embrace him. One of the major views of SDT that was previously noted in support of the notion of societal, environmental connection to the individual stated that - the social environment could either support or obstruct the natural inclinations toward active societal engagement and psychological growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Erikson stated that there is a shared responsibility of both the individual and society in terms of the accomplishment of ultimate development (Osborne, 2007). And one of the major principles of RCT is the need to modify the sociopolitical powers of disconnection that produce overwhelming suffering for people (Jordan, 2009).

Based on the data listed in the *Introduction* section there appeared to be repeated episodes of chronic disconnection between the sociopolitical forces of American society and many African American men. As was previously noted SDT is supported by five mini- theories one of which is - the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT). BPNT supports the concept of needs satisfaction, as this satisfaction is strongly association with healthy well-being within any societal environment. An individual must be supported first developmentally by parents or caretakers in terms of the encouragement of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The society in which an individual inhabits must also support and encourage these three elements within its

members (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). The use of the particular tenets from these three theories, which theorizes how an individual (in this case African American men) will not be able to cultivate a consistent level of well-being throughout all of the developmental stages if the sociopolitical forces within that society do not relate, connect or encourage his autonomy.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to seek knowledge from African American men who, on a regular basis, participate in mindfulness meditation practices (e.g. mindfulness, yoga or transcendental meditation) and to ascertain if they have been able to buffer the impact of psychosocial stressors, due to the use of this practice. These stressors are compiled (as the literature indicates) in disproportionate amounts upon African American men, in our society and become chronic stressors. The chronic stress may have a negative impact on the individual, the quality of the relational connections between the individual and his family, the individual and his community and the individual with American society. In this study, the participants were given the opportunity to share their retrospective, lived meditative mindfulness experiences. The findings will indicate if there is a connection between the regular practice of mindfulness meditation as a buffer against psychosocial stressors and if this buffering enables a more consistent level of well-being.

In this chapter, the following will be discussed: the study design, sample size, recruitment strategy, inclusion & exclusion criteria, data management, ethical considerations, risk assessment, reflexivity statement, and study duration/semi-structured interviews, the title of project and the research question.

STUDY DESIGN

SAMPLE SIZE AND RECRUITMENT

The sample size for the study was fourteen adult African American men. The ages ranged from 27 to 61 years of age. Initially, the plan was to recruit through various forms of

social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and a web page. However, through word of mouth and through the request of professional colleagues six of the participants were selected from the University of Pennsylvania's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR) and two other participants were selected from Thomas Jefferson University's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. The remaining six participants were also selected through word of mouth. Many of my professional work colleagues were very curious about the project, especially since many of them were concerned if I would be able to find any black men who meditate, in the City of Philadelphia. However, as I obligated myself to the topic of the project, I began to talk and inquire in all environments - at work (The Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health Intellectual Disabilities), at Penn's SP2, at Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) and during holiday gatherings with family, about if anyone knew of any black men who practiced mindfulness meditation.

The six Self-taught participants were asked about the possibility of participation in the project early in the process (I will briefly share some of their recruitment stories). When I received IRB approval in the spring of 2016, I re-connected with these men via email and sent each of them the recruitment material. I had previously asked about the length of time they had engaged in the mindfulness practice. So, I had that much of the inclusion information completed (such as age, race, gender and length of time involved in the practice of mindfulness meditation).

The eight former African American male MBSR participants were first notified by the administrative staff of their respective programs, who then sent the men my recruitment material. These men notified the administrative staff of their interest in participation in the

research project. The administrative staff sent me their contact information. These responses came very quickly. And these men all met the inclusion criteria.

I would like to briefly share three of the Self-taught recruitment stories which were memo notes. There was one self-taught recruit who was a gift from God. My wife and I decided to have a cup of coffee at our local Starbucks. My wife noticed this guy with headphones on, his eyes closed and his laptop open. She whispered to me that, he looks like he is meditating. You should talk to him. After around 15 minutes of staring at him and waiting for the right moment to inquire about what he was doing, I finally got his attention. He was meditating and was actually in the process of the conduction of his own mini-experiment to see if he could experience the practice of mindfulness meditation in an environment as noisy as a Starbucks (a gift from God). One again, I asked about the length of time he had practiced. He met that part of the inclusion criteria. He gave me his contact information, and I later emailed him my recruitment material. Several weeks later we met to complete the interview, in a quiet spot at the same Starbucks.

In 2015 during our Thanksgiving meal my new son-in-law, who is also a social worker asked me how things were going at school. When I mentioned my dissertation topic, he with excitement, told me that there was a man at his job that meditates, while at work. I asked my son-in-law to please give this man by phone number. My son-in-law's co-worker later texted me his contact information. After IRB approval, I emailed him the recruitment material. Two months later, we met at his home to complete the interview.

At work with the City of Philadelphia, I am a member of a group called Engaging Men of Color (EMOC). The group works towards the encouragement of the removal of the stigma to

seek help with issues that involve mental health. A year ago, we held a health fair, for men. As a part of the fair, we all participated in yoga breathing exercises and poses (which I found to be tough). I, of course, asked the instructor who was a Black male if he also practiced mindfulness meditation. His response was yes. I explained that I was in a doctoral program and I would contact him as I progressed towards the interview stage. Several months later, I interviewed him while sited (on a meditation pillow) on the floor of a Philadelphia yoga studio.

These stories prove the strength of word of mouth recruitment. However, I would not recommend that word of mouth be one's only recruitment strategy. All 14 men met the inclusion criteria for the study. All of the interviews were conducted face to face. Upon completion of the interview, each participant received a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card as a token of appreciation for participation in the interview.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The inclusion criteria for participation was you had to be an African American man, 18 years of age or older who participates in mindfulness meditation practices, such as mindfulness meditation, yoga meditation or transcendental meditation. The men must currently participate in mindfulness meditation practices on a regular basis. The minimum amount of time for the participation in mindfulness meditation practices was at least eight weeks of consistent practice. The participants were asked to describe their lived retrospective experiential stories about the cultivation of mindfulness meditation in comparison to life before the practice and if they are able to use the mechanisms of mindfulness meditation as a buffer against psychosocial stress.

DATA ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after IRB approval (March 10, 2016, Protocol # 824569, IRB# 8). Written consent forms were signed by the participants before the start of the interview. All of the interviews were audiotaped (a cassette tape recorder and a backup digital recorder were used). The interviews resulted in four types of data: the audio recording, the typed transcripts, the participant's demographic information and the researcher notes or memos, which were completed all throughout the process and used as a method to assist the analytic development of the data.

The researcher listened to the interviews during the initial taping. The interviews were listened to again by the researcher when it was determined that the quality of the digital recordings was superior to that of the cassette recordings and needed to be re-recorded onto blank cassette tapes . This process occurred because the use of the cassette recorder provided the researcher with the mechanism to start and stop the recorder to work within the process of typing the transcripts. The researcher listened to the interviews for a third time during the process of transcribing the interviews. This process took approximately two months to fully complete. Listening to the interviews for that additional time provided the opportunity for immersion with the data in the spoken form. The interviews were then read and re-read several times and reviewed for grammatical errors.

Grounded Theory (GT) was used as the qualitative framework for the analysis of the completed interviews. Grounded theory methods consist of systemic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves (Charmaz, 2014). Thus researchers build a theory “grounded” in their data (Charmaz, 2014,

p. 1). Grounded theory begins with inductive data (which moves from observation, patterns, tentative hypothesis to theory), invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods and keeps you interactive with the data and involved with your data and emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

The method of line by line coding was used. Line by line coding means naming each line of your written data (Glaser, 1978). “Initial codes help you to separate data into categories and to see processes” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 127). Focus coding was then used. “This type of coding condenses and sharpens what you have already done because it highlights what you find to be important in your emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Theoretical codes were then reviewed and categorized from the data. From this process the six categories emerged from the retrospective experiences of the participants.

Once all of the codes were categorized, the analysis of the codes was completed by the researcher. A constructivist grounded theory approach was utilized. “Constructivist study how and sometimes why participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (Charmaz 2014, p. 239). Charmaz further states that “A constructivist approach means more than looking at how individuals view their situations; it not only theorizes the interpretive work that research participants do but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation” (2014, p. 239). “The theory *depends* on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 239).

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All of the data obtained from the interview questions (which included the researcher’s memo notes) were stored on a password-protected laptop and maintained in the researcher’s

home office, in a locked file cabinet. The data from the interviews were transcribed into text (which will included the researcher's memo notes); this data was also stored and maintained in a locked file cabinet in the home office of the researcher. Each participant was assigned a code number. For example, the numbers one to fourteen will be placed next to a pseudonym, which replaced each participant's real name.

All demographic information from the participant was stored and maintained in a separate, locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Therefore, the password protected laptop, and the transcribed text (and memo notes) were stored in the same locked file cabinet as the demographic information. All demographic data and audio cassette tapes will be destroyed by the researcher, upon completion of the project.

RISK AND BENEFITS ASSESSMENT

The risk of participation- this statement was included in the consent form signed by each participant. The risk of participation is minimal. However, if a participant experiences discomfort when answering a question, I will inform him that he must immediately make the researcher aware of his discomfort. I will inform each participant that he can momentarily stop the interview process at any time and I will inform each participant he has the right to stop the entire interview. In the unlikely event that a participant becomes upset during or after the interview process, I will provide him with the names and phone numbers of individuals or agencies that can provide further assistance.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Although being interviewed will not directly help a participant, it is also possible that having a chance to share his story will be a motivating and a satisfying experience for him and

other individuals. In addition, their participation in this project will help to increase my knowledge on how to engage in strong qualitative interview research in the future.

REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT

According to Gilgun (2010), the core of the idea of reflexivity is “the idea of awareness that researchers are reflexive when they are aware of various influences they have on research processes and on how the research process affect them” (p.1). Being reflexive thus necessitates that researchers constantly reflect on how their own experiences, assumptions, and biases might influence what they research, what they or their research participants say or do, and how they understand what their research participants say or do. Berg (2007) defines the reflexivity process as engaging in an internal dialogue that repeatedly examines “*what the researcher knows and how the researcher came to know this*” (p. 179).

As an African American man who is confronted directly and indirectly by psychosocial stressors, on a daily basis, I am very well aware of the how these stressors can have an impact on one’s (emotional, mental and social) well-being. I am also conscious of the benefits of mindfulness meditation since I have practiced (*Self-taught*) the discipline, for over twenty years. In addition prior to that, I was formally taught Transcendental Meditation (TM) while a senior in high school. I still remember my mantra. I practiced TM during and many years after college. However, I later became inconsistent with the practice and eventually stopped altogether.

I read and re-read Jon Kabat- Zinn’s book “Wherever you go there you are” (1994). I discovered him and the book, after reading about his work in an article featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer -Magazine. This simple but difficult practice as narrated in the book has been the guide for my regular mindfulness meditation practice since 1994. I mentioned that the

book was difficult because the concept of being fully present, living in the present moment, all throughout the day is tough. It can be simultaneously delightful, frightening, loving and heartbreaking all within a matter of seconds. It must be noted that I felt that I already possessed a certain level of natural or trait mindfulness qualities before my participation in both practices. However more so, through the practice of mindfulness meditation, I was able to enhance those natural mindfulness abilities.

My ability to notice certain nuances in people's personalities and certain elements in my environment appeared to be greatly enhanced. So for example, if someone behaved in a negative manner towards me and I noticed that the same person moments later were completely polite to someone else in their presence, you tend to take on that rejection (especially mentally and emotionally). The great thing about the cultivation of the practice is your ability to try not to allow the process of "taking on" another person's perceived undesirable actions, for too long, if at all. Presently, I will notice a perceived negative behavior and then quickly come back to the present moment.

The concept of the seated mindful meditation (focused breathing), for 20 minutes twice a day has been beneficial for me, over the years. I believe that the meditation cultivates the mindfulness. During this time I am able to allow thoughts to come into my mind and even work through a problem that I may have. I am still focused on my breathing, during this time. It has been my experience that I am more energized and ready to face future life experiences, in a mindful manner. The experiences of life are what I call "real time" and occur in the present moment. In my experience, a mindful manner is also - thoughtful, layered, organized and multidimensional. With that said, I still can become angry, and I am still capable thinking

negative thoughts about others. However, what I have noticed over time is that, I do not stay or dwell in these places for very long.

I had a number of successes as I tried to live in a mindful manner throughout the years. And I have been able to manage and control most of the psychosocial stressors directed towards me. The others, I let them go. My regular practice of mindfulness meditation is a vast part of the toolkit that I use to combat psychosocial stressors. Some of the other items that I maintain in my toolkit are unyielding family ties (mainly nuclear), purposeful work, a love of education and learning new things, John Coltrane, exercise, and prayer. With that said, I am biased towards the hypothesis that mindfulness meditation can act as a buffer for African American men who practice the discipline on a regular basis.

Although my experiences with the regular practice of mindfulness meditation as a buffer against psychosocial stress have been mostly successful, I strongly felt that I was fully capable and prepared to conduct this qualitative research study in an unbiased, fair and nonjudgmental manner. It was my goal to hear and experience the stories of the 14 individuals from their perspective, without any feedback or persuasion from me. When probes were needed, the process was used to encourage the men to expand on the discussion, not to sway the discussion towards the hypothesis. The grounded theory concept of memo note taking was helpful throughout the process (writing within the margins of the transcripts), which helped me maintain focus from one interview to the next. I was able to maintain boundaries, and I was very cognizant not to allow the interviews to become therapy sessions, which was one of the many points very strongly stressed by Dr. Leslie Alexander, our instructor for qualitative research methods (2015).

STUDY DURATION/SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

After IRB approval, the initially forecasted length of time to conduct the interviews of 14 participants was 6 months. However, the interviews were completed from April 2016 to June 2016. The interview process includes semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each participant reviewed and then signed a consent form prior to the interview. The interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted face to face. As was previously mentioned, all of the interviews were recorded using two audio tape devices.

TITLE OF PROJECT, RESEARCH QUESTION

Title: Role of Mindfulness as a Buffer against Psychosocial stress among African American Men. Research Question: *Do African American Men Experience their Mindfulness Meditation Practice as a Buffer against Psychosocial Stress?*

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

THE PARTICIPANTS

Between the months of April to June 2016, fourteen African American men consented to be interviewed as participants in a qualitative research study, on the role of the regular practice of mindfulness meditation as a buffer against psychosocial stress. Eight of the participant's successfully completed an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course held at either the University of Pennsylvania or Thomas Jefferson University. Five of the participants were *Self-taught* mindfulness meditation practices (either by a friend, a relative, the internet - blogs, books or the use of an app) and one of the participants received formal training in yoga instruction in India.

Most of the participants lived in the City of Philadelphia or right outside of the City, in one of the surrounding counties. One participant lived in New Jersey. And one participant lived in Maryland. The ages of the participants ranged from 27 to 61. The participants' educational levels are as follows: one participant is presently working on an associate degree in behavioral health/ human services, one participant has an associate's degree; four of the participants have bachelor's degrees, one participant is in a doctoral program, one participant is an M.D., one of the participant has a Ph.D., three of the participants have master's degrees, and two of the participants have Juris Doctorate degrees.

The participants' occupations are as follows: a yoga instructor, a cardiac nurse, an independent driver, a professor of anesthesiology, a scientist, a management design strategist, a paralegal, a psychotherapist, a social service director, a social worker, an accountant/ tree

maintenance company owner, a head of a legal advocacy program, a chief legal officer and a retired civil servant. All but four of the participants have children. None of the participants had more than two children. Seven of the men are married, one is a co-parent. And six of the men are single.

The next section will present themes and illustrative quotes from the participants, which emerged from the data (see Table 1.). The six themes are as follows: 1.) many mindfulness modalities, 2.) racism is experienced as a barrier to well-being; 3.) applying mindfulness at work 4.) primacy of relational stress, 5.) mindfulness promotes self-regulation, and 6.) the mindful child.

Table 1. Themes and Illustrative Quotes from Participants (N=14)

Number	Theme	Quote
1	Many Mindfulness Modalities	"Social meditation, It's meditation through social aspects it's like mindfulness exercises, you just try to be fully aware of your presence. They ask questions during the meditation segment ". "It is a headband that is basically an EEG monitor that you put on and it gives you feedback as to whether you are focusing on your breathing."
2	Racism is Experienced as a Barrier to Well-being	"I know that there are some challenges associated with being an African American man. I think that the meditation really helps with my well-being to manage those challenges associated with the cards that you were given in life." "Black men have a lot to deal with, just waking up every day and walking out of the door. So it is harder to take care of your well-being."
3	Applying Mindfulness at Work	"I am learning how to do deeper breathing and deep listening when I interview people, which is a meditative state."
4	Primacy of Relational Stress	"My children, not so much them, but they have separate moms." "Stressors that increasingly coming up - parents aging and trying to take care of parents."
5	Mindfulness Promotes Self-Regulation	"I can still go from 0 to 60 when I am angry about something. But, the mindfulness brings me to a place of peace where I can regroup and take control of myself, and bring myself back to a place of more stability and peace. "
6	The Mindful Child	"I had ADD and looking back over my life; I do wonder how much different my life would be if I learned to be present, whether I was playing sports or studying, I do wonder." "If this had occurred as a kid, I might have been more comfortable with myself, more accepting and more patient, more forgiving of things that we do as adolescents, as young men."

THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE DATA

1. Many Mindfulness Modalities

The use of many mindfulness modalities as a theme emerged from the data as the participants described their various experiences to cultivate mindfulness for the enhancement of presence, patience, and focus. These themes emerged as a result of their many differences and similarities. The practice of quiet mindful breathing while meditating and deep mindful breathing, which could be used in any stressful environment when needed, were practiced on a regular basis by most of the participants. The times and the settings varied. However, many other methods were used to enhance mindfulness which involved the integration of mindfulness practices with another activity or activities. Many of the participants described a desire to one day try yoga. However, some of the participants practiced yoga on a regular basis and found the benefits of yoga (as a method to enhance the ability to stretch muscles) to improve their weight lifting or exercise routines.

The participants described the use of these other multiple methods – music meditation; guided meditation; positive self-talk; mindful walking; mindful eating; meditation movement; social meditation; Muse Head Band; meta meditation loving-kindness practice; grounding technique which involves the practice of intense focus on multiple items within one's environment and being highly in tune with your body and the sensations of the sense of touch; the use of an Insight Timer App; 20 breaths, in which the breaths are counted as an exercise that enhances focus and relaxation in all environments; mindful living, which is the intentional integration of mindfulness principles in everyday life experiences and stop - breath deep, which

is a techniques used in all environments when one needs to bring focus back to the present moment Martin 27 (self-taught) a college student, home health aide, and independent driver talked about his experience with “music meditation and quiet mediation” as a mindfulness method that he utilizes –

I use music meditation when I am in stressful situations. I use silent meditation when I am meditating on my dreams and my goals. It is like goals and planning for what I am going to do next. I meditate towards positive thoughts. I use music to change negative thoughts to positive thoughts. If I feel stressful, the music helps me relieve the stress.

Alwin 33 (self-taught) a clinical social worker discussed the multiple methods of the use of intended distractions and participation in social meditation.

I use breathing and positive self-talk awareness, almost every day. I probably interact with yoga - it used to be weekly now it's monthly. Around a couple of times a month, I might do a yoga class or a hot yoga class. If I am getting flustered with a task, I might take a break from the task, change activities and take a deep breath to re-center myself. Or, I will go to a different room and try something else and come back to it. A couple of times a week I do quiet meditation at home usually in the evening. And at least once a month I go to social meditation at the Jewish Kabbalah Center in Baltimore (a friend initially invited me to attend with him). It's meditation through social aspects it's like mindfulness exercises; you just try to be fully aware of your presence. So, they ask questions during the meditation segment, which is 90 minutes.

The use of a device called a Muse Head Band, and the practice of Loving-kindness were communicated by William 34 (MBSR) who is a medical doctor.

So, usually when I practice it's quiet. But I am following a guided practice. So, I do many different types. I do mindfulness of breathing; I do a Meta practice. Meta is Loving Kindness meditation where you kind of focus on various people and wish them well. So I engage in that practice. And I do a body scan. So these are the main three core things that I do. I can't say that I have a system for when I do what. You know if I have a tough situation with an individual I would do loving-kindness meditation. But most of the time I am doing breath focused meditation. I have done some walking meditation, but that is not a big part. I just try to be mindful in everything that I am doing. There is a certain high that you get from meditation that is kind of addictive. And so even if I am not experiencing any stress – it has become a habit now. I meditate every day. I meditate several times during the day. And now I have gotten this Muse Head Band. Which, I was a little skeptical about. But, I got it for free. So, I said I would give it a try. It is a headband that is basically an EEG monitor that you put on and it gives you feedback as to whether you are focusing on your breathing. I think there is something to it. So, I use that quite a bit now. So with that when you are focusing on your breathing, and you hear birds chirping or when you are distracted when the music gets loud, and I guess some people have been critical of it. But, I have found it to help me get to that high easier or faster. I found myself using it with guided practice I have been doing that a lot.

The method of “mindful living” in which mindfulness is merged into most of your daily routines was explained by Malcolm 30 (self-taught) a social worker.

We (he and his wife) do yoga as well, about two or three times a week. For me, it's a little different. I do it more because I strength train. So, and I realize that because I am benching more of an amount that I am proud of squatting and deadlifting. It's a different type of strength – just like the yoga moves strong in some ways and super weak, in other ways. So, I started doing it more for that - to increase my flexibility. So, once again it fits well because of my practice. But usually, once I am there my intention is how I can do these moves stronger. The intent is that with everything you are going to be mindful. So when I lift it is with the same intent – I am fully present with that lift, when I am running, jogging the elliptical machine – I am fully present there. For me, yoga has that history of meditation - but I try to live that in all areas. There are two different types of practice – in the room (in the morning) for 8 to 13 minutes, and then I try to practice mindful living, all throughout the day. Some days it is more difficult. There are lots of practices like sometimes I can take a walk at work. Thich Nhat Hanh the writer I was telling you about – he is a fan of mindful walking at a slow pace. There are other schools of thought that mention mindful walking, but it is faster. So, one of my favorite quotes by him is “walk as though your feet are kissing the earth.” So, I really like that idea of – each step being fully present. And when you do it you just realize how much we really have. You realize how much we have as people and being connected to the earth, rather than just trying to just get from point “A” to “B.” So, I try to incorporate these things into my day. But once again, I mean, it's – the nature of all of this is that you get off track and you have to bring yourself back. So, you lose attention to the moment because you are thinking about bills,

your wife and life but then you get back – which is what I try to do throughout the day. Another factor depends on if I am running late or if I wake up late, it can be as short as 5 minutes, I try to do 12 to 15 minutes on the weekend. I do 15 minutes, definitely daily (except when I wake up late). It really helps me especially in the morning when I get started off. Because then I can continue being mindful throughout the day. It's just getting the day started on the right foot – type of thing.

Malcolm expands on his use of multiple mindfulness meditation practices in relationship to food and eating.

So, I practice mindful eating. I eat slowly. The Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, he is a really prolific writer. And he was talking about when you eat your food, don't just look at it like a grape. Look at all that went into place for this grape to actually be, like the dirt, the sun, the vine, the person who actually picked it, from whatever country it came from (the sunshine, the water). It kind of all manifest into this for this brief period of time. It is such a gift from God when you look at it like that. I try to practice that when I eat and not to eat too much. This year I lost about 80 pounds. With the weight loss, it was like creating systems. So, specifically, when I think of mindfulness, it is just the idea of being fully present. It is so easy to eat in front of the T.V. or the computer (watching Netflix or something like that). But to be fully present with each bite and to let my food digest and to drink plenty of water as I eat, it really helps. I realize that I really don't need as much food as I was consuming. So, other things I did, I did a lot of research. So, I discovered that for me intermittent fasting, essentially you don't eat for like between 18 to 30 hours. So what I do I stop eating at around 8 o'clock? And I don't start eating

again to around 12:30 or 1pm the next day... so coming up with a system and being fully present in that system, so when I am fast every day (like right now I have not eaten yet). Sometimes you have hunger pains; sometimes you don't. Sometimes you feel strong. Sometimes you feel weaker. Being fully present with what your body is experiencing has been really helpful.

Wes 48 (MBSR) who is an attorney spoke of “mindful movement” which is the use of running as a method of mindfulness meditation.

I try to use a daily practice. In the past, I would use the facilitated audio sessions that were part of that Penn Medicine facilitation. But these days I mostly have an app on my phone, and I set a timer and develop a mindfulness practice using that. I would say that it used to be daily - in the last 6 months, it has been once every two weeks. 20 minutes. The course was in the spring of 2014. Let me go back to one other way. I also am a runner and an active runner, and I don't listen to music or pieces when I run. So, I find because of my activity of running I often use that. It is something where I have appreciated running more as a result of this course. So again this topic of going back to one of the questions about how do you practice mindfulness or the methods and what I have done since taking the course in 2014, I prepare myself for running by doing 30 seconds to a minute of quiet reflection and then I began my run which can go anywhere from 30 minutes to 90 minutes and during that time or during the course of the run I should say, I will be mindful of my breathing. I will be mindful of thoughts sometimes letting thoughts just flow. And again that is just more of a – what I would describe as meditation movement. I run about three times a week, and the running is anywhere from 30 minutes

to as much as 90 minutes. There definitely is a separation; the mindfulness is what I described earlier. The setting is twenty minutes using the app and generally a sitting practice without the facilitation of the audio tape that I was describing, that we had used during the Penn Mindfulness, just simply focusing on my breathing and the body scan that was introduced. I typically use the app in my home, in the morning.

Lloyd 33 (self-taught) who is a yoga instructor and an artist, talked about his experience with learning and teaching yoga and how it relates to a method of mindfulness.

I mean it's so interesting - because the word yoga means union. And in the West when we say yoga, we mean like physical practice, I am doing my yoga poses - but in India where I did my first teachers training the focus was on the practice of finding presence and connection, between all the different aspects of yourself. So it was great because I came back from my TT or Teachers Training. I might use some jargon. Definitely aware that like, all of the things that I do that bring me to focus are yoga or mindfulness. So, my art making is a mindfulness practice, my drawings, when I am focused and listening to music. But definitely, yoga was there in the beginning as a way to focus. So, there are times where I will just do a seated meditation practice with no yoga poses. I definitely practice that 5 times a week, at different times of the day. Sometimes that will be with music; sometimes it will be with silence. And that usually has to do with how loud it is in my house and how loud it is outside of my home. I live in West Philly.

So, as it gets warmer, folks are out and about on the block. If I want to drown out some of that noise, I will put some music on. If it's quiet because it is early or late. I will do it in silence. And sometimes I will sit before my yoga practice or after my yoga practice.

I try to make it to a class once a week. If you are not studying, you are not growing. And there is only so much studying you can do at home by yourself. I also have - a meditation app (Insight timer) that I use on my phone that I either set for five or seven minutes. And that is my base. So, it's like once I hear the "ding" for five minutes, that's if I don't have a lot of time, I know that it's going to be short. I will set it for five. If I know, I have some more time, and it's almost open ended I will set it for seven. For me what usually happens around that point is that I can drop into it versus just struggling with it and then I can choose whether – oh, I am done. Or, I am going to keep going.

Aaron 50 (MBSR), a work design strategist, discussed the method of intentional distractions in connection to mindfulness and focus.

Stop-breath deep is one of the methods that they taught us at the mindfulness course. I think it was stop - breath deep. I mentioned that my company moved into helping people into conversations and developed training to help people have better quality conversations and within the training, we built in a stop-breath deep. And so you stop whatever you are doing, close your eyes, stop thinking about whatever you are thinking about, take a deep breath and then open your eyes. At least this is the way I remember it and the way I do it. It lets your awareness kind of come back and like see what is in the room and get a new perspective on things before you go on.

2. Racism is Experienced as a Barrier to Well-being (Macro level)

Most of the participant's described that the achievement and cultivation of well-being appeared to be different and inundated with more challenges for African American men, than other groups. Therefore the challenges were related to issues more on a macro level (large scale social processes). Themes emerged from the data which indicated that privilege and racism were the major factors that hindered well-being for them, individually. It should be noted when asked within the interview process, the majority of the participants stated that their present state of well-being was good. Therefore, it appeared that although these negative lived experiences that involved racism and white privilege tended to challenge or hinder the achievement of well-being but did not stop the occurrence of a healthy level of well-being, at certain points and times in their lives. Walter 38 (self-taught) who works as a scientist described how the practice of meditation had an impact on his well-being –

I know that there are definitely some challenges associated with being an African-American man. I think the meditation really helps with my well-being – to manage those challenges associated with the cards that you were given in life.

In terms of well-being George 32 (MBSR) a paralegal mentioned that, African American men experience overall more stressors that impact the path to well-being.

African American men experience more stressors than other people, other demographics. I know for me, one big thing is I have a lot of health problems that run in my family – high blood pressure. So, I am always cognitive of what I eat, diet and things like that. My dad's side of the family has weight issues. Eating healthy and physical

fitness and things like that have always been big. My mental health in terms of the stress carries over into my physical health. I am finding effective ways to manage my stress and you just kind of lead a balanced life. There is a difference, I think because of the different types of stressors I was very fortunate and blessed that I didn't have to need for much. But, I think that the African American community has the most social economic stressors just in terms of what I was saying. The African American community is plagued with issues like sickle cell, diabetes, high blood pressure things like that, that we have to watch out for and monitor our diet and things like that.

Edward 61 (MBSR), a retired civil servant, stated that -

There is a lot of injustice and inequality, and I think at 61, I have not come to accept it. But, I have come to accept the reality of it and not let that small part of my world beat me up. Do you know what I mean? Black men have a lot to deal with, just waking up every day and walking out of the door. So, it is harder to take care of your well-being.

Raymond 51 a psychotherapist (self-taught) agrees that there is a difference in the achievement in well-being-

For African American and Latino, it is survival every day. You don't know when you are going to be picked up. You don't want to be a statistic – dead or jailed. There is a difference in privilege. When is the last time you heard of someone who was white being beat-up by police officers? You don't see that at all.

Steven 47 a cardiac nurse (MBSR) agreed that the path to well-being for African American men is filled with obstacles, but those obstacles can be creatively solved through mindfulness.

For African American men I believe well-being once again is striving for balance. Living in the world that we live in... this is funny I was talking to someone the other day about a song we used to sing during black history month – “We Shall Overcome.” And we have been singing that a long time. The reality of the situation is we just live in a very, very racist society. Now you may not be able to change society. I can’t change the way another race or nationality thinks about me because of the color of my skin. You know nothing about me, how I do what I do. You just want to judge me because of the color of my skin. Because of the fact of the time, expenditure needed to try to change people and the way they think, I don’t have time to do that, all I can do is to continue to be me.

Steven further explained -

As an African American man and as far as mindfulness is concerned I believe that mindfulness helps me feel better about myself. My self-esteem, my self-image and the way I see myself, in my opinion, has increased, because of mindfulness. The reason why I said that is because of this – as I had mentioned before, mindfulness has had a positive impact on my ability to focus, my reasoning. Before, when I would be out and about out in society whether I was going to church or to a restaurant if I would see an injustice my initial response mentally and emotionally was to become the Incredible Hulk. I just felt myself swelling up. I felt as if I wanted to grab somebody up, but of course, I would have to be rational. Because if I grab somebody, I am losing my nursing license. So, I can’t do that. Even though I want to be that hero to save the day - I say you know what Steven there is a different way you can approach this. Even though those people are strangers over there, one is provoking me ... there is a different way to approach this. If I have an

opportunity, I could go over, and I could talk and help them to see that what you are doing is wrong. If in fact the person does not see it, I at least attempted it. To me, my self-esteem, my self-confidence and who I am, and what I am able to do as a lover of humanity who wants to see everybody get along –has improved. I feel as though I could be a real game-changer when it comes to social injustice and when it comes to social, economic problems that we are facing.

Aaron 50 (MBSR) recalled two incidents in which he experienced the stressors of racism and then hypervigilance that could have impacted the path to his well-being during those times in his life –

A few years ago my mom was living in the house that I grew up in, a little suburban neighborhood. I was walking around at night talking to a friend who was having relationship trouble - maybe going to get a divorce. I did not want to be in my mom's house having that conversation. So, I walked around the neighborhood. And this is a neighborhood where I grew up, and I am used to sitting out in the street all night long with my friends and not get into trouble and not doing anything. So, I was just walking around, and there was every now and then somebody walking a dog. And then somehow deep in this conversation, I stopped at one point, and around two or three police cars, 6-8 policemen showed up. And I spent like 45 minutes over the front of a police car with them checking my license and shit and looking at their hands as they placed them on their guns. This was a little stressful. I later had a talk with the main cop dude, an ethnic white dude, while I was there. My neighborhood had changed since 1975, when I lived there. There have been burglaries. Probably, if I was a white dude hanging out on the corner at

that time of night having a phone call – I would probably have not had the police called on me. There is the real stuff that is stressful, and it's just stressful just figuring it out what is specific and what is not – processing all that stuff is exhausting.

Aaron experienced a similar situation in which the stressors of racism and hypervigilance later noted as possible indications of the different paths that African American men experience to obtain well-being -

I don't want to compare who knows what they go through - as far as well-being. But I do know facts about hypervigilance and stress things. Like my girlfriend is a white lady, who lives in a cute little town in Jersey. She has a condo in a little condo place. And it has been cool. I have never had any problems over there. But I drove over there one day, and I think that I may have had groceries or my dirty laundry so that I can wash it there while we were hanging out. So I had some bags to get out of my trunk, and there was a police car in front of one of the neighbor's condo. So, I called her up. I am 100 feet away. But, I called her up to say that there is a police car out in front of your neighbor's home. So, I am coming over but if I am not there in 5 minutes come out. So, that is stressful, and actually, I feel that I am repressing stuff. Compared to most black men having to deal with bullshit, I lived in a charmed little world where people are nice. Shit is fine. I appreciate that and understand that, is not always everybody's circumstance.

3. Applying Mindfulness at Work

The participants often spoke about their experiences with the application of mindfulness practices at work from numerous perspectives and for different purposes. A theme that emerged from the data was that in which the mindfulness concepts were integrated into the actual work and the workplace environment to either decrease stressful situations or to strengthen awareness, calmness, patience and focus for a more efficient manner to complete work.

Alwin 33 (self-taught) conversed about how he has learned to incorporate mindful practices in his work for enhanced relational benefits between him and his clients-

I am learning how to do deeper breathing and deep listening when I interview people, which is a meditative state. You know you really focus on what people are saying without drawing judgments or conclusions. In that way, mindfulness and meditation are a part of my daily life.

James 54 (MBSR) an accountant, who owns a tree maintenance company, reflected on his past and current experiences with the energy and the fulfillment he received from being present in his work which initially was extremely physical and involved an intimate one on one connection with nature. He talked about the transition of the presence associated with mindfulness to a different type of work, in which he has to relate to people as opposed to trees.

I have looked into taking the mindfulness to other levels. I am practicing it some in my work. Right now, sitting still meditation is my most productive way to cultivate mindfulness. Just to elaborate a bit, I want to increase it more with my work, particularly with the tree work. One of the things when I got into the tree business – one of the things

that I use to love about it was that it was me and the tree. Once I am in the tree, it's just me. I was very present with it. I did not realize it at the time. What I did note is that I enjoyed it a lot. Once I started my company, I realized that I am no longer a tree climber and all of the dynamics changed. I became a business owner. So a lot of that joy was gone. I was always rushing to the next task. But now it's coming back to where I am learning to enjoy the present. I am cutting a lot and enjoying it. Feeling the sensation of the vibration, it's just present. In my other business –it is learning to listen to people without going ahead with the thoughts of what I am going to say next. Because that other business is interacting with people more.

Malcolm 30 (self-taught) talked about how he is able to use mindfulness practices at work to decrease stressful situations and to relate in a healthier manner with his clients.

So at our job, I have a client who is very draining. Everybody lies to us because we confront them with the worst parts of their lives. No one likes to be told that they are bad parents, to put it bluntly, because of drug use and everything else that they are doing. They are at low points. With that being said, everybody lies. Nobody is happy to talk to us. It can be exhausting. This one person, In particular, is extremely exhausting, and I am honestly getting tired of her bullshit. It is much more difficult for me when I am not practicing mindfulness, to be able to be centered. It is easier for me to get thrown off. It can look different in a ton of different ways. I don't know if you know people who can work themselves up. And people who can make themselves believe the stories that they are telling to the point in which they are not necessary lies anymore – they are not truth. They are just stories that they are just incorporating, narratives that they are telling

about themselves. When I don't meditate, it is consuming. So, in the situation with the client the thoughts that I have whether they are thoughts of anger or it's me allowing myself to feel what she is feeling and allowing that to consume me. There is no distance, like the impulse with all of the emotion – so that is what happens if I don't meditate.

Wes 48 (MBSR) elaborated on the need to re-focus and to readjust at work.

The stressors try to get at my wellbeing and try to interfere with the sweet spot that I am trying to get to and that's all right. I think that in some ways what mindfulness does is allow me to not necessarily feel like it's getting me towards that sweet spot. It is allowing me to say that this is a stressor. I am not trying to reject it. I am trying to say that this is a stressor in my life. And how do I deal with it? It may be a presentation that didn't go well, I can try to make the next one better. But the fact is the presentation didn't go all that well. I got to deal with that. It could get me really upset. It will influence an action but in the here and now it didn't go all that well. How am I going to deal with that? How am I going to let that sit? How do I, in some way, recalibrate to deal with that stress? To some degree, it is kind of a fine line of acceptance of the situation or my reaction to it. But at the same time, why am I so bothered by it? What could I have done differently?

Aaron 50 (MBSR) talks about how he was able to implement mindfulness practices as a method to increase presence and focus within the workplace.

There is a way where I don't think of myself as a spiritual person practically, and then there is a way that I am really vigorously – in terms of mindfulness and presence. It is really important, and I have a lot of supports for it built into the way I work. And there is also work practices coming out of software development – Agile Work Method. A lot of

that stuff is in the context of getting work done and working with other people, but it is about being present and in a way mindful. I don't know if you have heard about Combine – It's a way of organizing your task. It is out of Japan. The software people started using it for software development, and now people use it for any kind of work in their personal life. It is really a simple method that we have – empty your head of all of the stuff that you have to do, put it on post-its or pads or whatever and that is your backlog. You have doing, done and waiting. You only have three things you are doing at one time and once you start using it, if you kind of assimilate it ends up being a work practice, mindful thing, where you are only focused on the three things, you are doing. And you are not worried about prioritizing the things that you are doing. And after a while, you don't have a huge bunch of stuff in your backlog because you are spreading your attention that far. Actually in terms of mindfulness, I guess this counts as mindfulness. It is generally helpful. But when it is really helpful for me like - if I am procrastinating or something or if I am hyper-focusing on something. I will literally put up a post-it for go to the bathroom. Because in other words, I will just like keep working for hours even though I need to ... so it helps me with that. And, I am thinking about work practices that I came up with my partners. For a while the way I think about it is that - they (the mindfulness practices) are more about habits and habits are hard to get into place and easy to lose and not actually not so important that if I chose specific practices at other times. It is really more important that I built that stuff into my life.

4. Primacy of Relational Stress (Micro level)

In terms of current psychosocial stressors, the data indicated multiple themes due to their differences based on the responses to the selected subjects from the participants. The data was notably and considerably varied, in that, although the participant's shared the same gender, race and similar mindfulness meditation and well-being experiences their experiences in this area appeared to be based on the primacy of relational stress and more on a micro level (small scale interactions between individuals). For example, we are all African American men, therefore, our most important individual psychosocial stressors may also be vastly similar. The data did not indicate this phenomenon. Their overall responses were mainly individualized however not exclusive to African American men. Financial stability, concerns about the future care of aging parents and the ability to balance work and family were some of the current stressors noted in the data. And although the themes that emerged from the data indicated different current psychosocial stressors, most of the stressors appeared to be relational in manner. Martin 27 (self-taught) communicated his main psychosocial stressor involved issues around the visitation of his two children.

My children, not so much them, but they have separate moms. So I am dealing with one telling me can I come and get him. And then I would tell her that I have school. Can I come and get him a couple of days from now or maybe even tomorrow. And she will maybe give me an attitude and things of that nature. And I would really get stressed out. I am telling you "no" for a reason. It's not because I want to do me and I don't want to come (for a visit). I have important things to do, and it seems like you just want it (the visitation) for you.

Wes 48 (MBSR) conversed about current stressors related to the future care of his aging parents

So, I am answering that by what is my well-being and what keeps me from that zone – which I was describing earlier in our conversation. What is keeping me in that zone these days is fulfillment with work, making sure that I feel that my work has purpose and meaning, the balance between the feeling of having a purposeful life and at the same time thinking - all right maybe I need to think about a different sort of job. I like my work.

But, I am not quite sure. There may be something I want to do differently. So, there is job fulfillment stressors. Stressors that are increasingly coming up – parents aging and trying to take care of my parents. I am not there yet, but I am anxious about the future. And trying to do my best to stay engaged with my parents, also I am starting to get stressed out as they age and where to I want to be involved in terms of helping them. I am not thinking too much in the future but being mindful of that as a stressor. Those are some of the stressors that are going on.

Steven 47 (MBSR) gave his thoughts on a current financial stressor and the possibility that he will be able to handle the stressor and not let it consume him.

My son got a scholarship to school but it was one of the last scholarships the school was giving, so it paid his tuition, but it did not take care of his room and board, which for the fall and spring semesters totaled like \$10,000. When an unexpected bill comes, you just find a way to pay it. There is a way to keep living and to keep everything else going and still be able to satisfy this bill. So, that would have the potential to be a psychosocial stressor. But it doesn't because mindfulness has helped me to see that there is an answer. I was working part-time as a pediatric nurse, doing home care. I did that for seven years.

And I needed to free up more time to be able to do other things. What I am saying, I am making less money, but we are still able to do everything we need to do to live and to be able to pay this extra bill, without the extra job. There is always, always a solution. So even with my son's tuition – I am not freaking and tripping. I am not trying to say that I have made it or arrived but I am just beyond that. It is just good stuff.

Stanley 52 (MBSR) a chief legal officer stated that he is currently stressed about what he views as disparities in education, health and the missed opportunities of other black people, with an acknowledgment that he does provide individualize help.

The disparity in education is a current stressor for me. My family has been very blessed my niece just graduated from MIT. So, we have been very blessed in that regard. But you know, I will see kids her age who are totally different. And it is just because (my belief) of the educational background they have been given or lack thereof and when I see stuff like that it bothers me. I don't see a lot of racism now because of my position and what I have done, and maybe it is there, and I just don't know it anymore. So, I don't even see it that much anymore. I would say the education stuff is the main thing. I will go to the grocery store, and I will see our people, black people acting certain – kind of way. I can't walk in that person's shoes if they would have had some of the same luck or benefits that I had, they would be a different person. There would be a better outcome. And then you start thinking why can't everybody have this – why can't we have universal health care? Why don't we have universal education and all of that kind of stuff? But then that starts to contribute to stress, so you say you know what - thank God for what you have. And you

have been blessed to the extent where you can be in the position to help somebody, and you do.

The psychosocial stressor of wealth disparities and the lack of inheritance was discussed by Lloyd 33 (self-taught).

I mean I think in general like ... the amount of wealth disparities in this country, for African decedent folks. The fact that I don't have like property that has been passed down that serves as a wealth base to do some cool shit with my daughters. I think just that absolutely, it is a stressor. It is great to remind myself that, every single one of my ancestors had to deal with it in an amplified form. You can acknowledge it but don't let it stop you. It's like cultural stuff, were how people see you before they know you. And that is just getting annoying.

Raymond 51 (self-taught) voiced that his current stressors are work, family and the rebirth of his relationship with his wife.

My therapy practice because there are high expectations for that. How people will perceive me when I go out to sell the product. There is a financial piece as well. There was a twofold transition from my previous job to now. The second thing is relationship, our two boys (20 and 18) they are going to be leaving the house. But there is a transition for my wife and me. Because now, we are starting to get to know each other again. So for me, it is two transitions. The job is no longer the issue. Now, we are trying to get to know each other. The boys are getting older and can go and do their thing.

5. Mindfulness Promotes Self-Regulation

Self-regulation was a repeated theme throughout the data. Self-regulation was noted by the participants in two manners. Many of the participants indicated that the mindfulness meditation practice had enabled them to not react so quickly to events that occurred in their environments which could potentially be stressful and harmful to their short and long-term well-being. Many of the men often described how they were able to not be so quick to react to perceived stressors. The mention of learning how to create space, distance and control of one's actions in stressful situations were noted.

The other manner in which self-regulation was noted in the data was in the form of emotional regulation. Many of the men voiced that they also took a moment to view how and why they perceived a certain situation in a particular manner especially in terms of how people, reacted to them (mainly as African American men), which could lead to, as mentioned in the data - *rumination of thoughts, going down hypothetical alley or catastrophizing* situations to the degree in which one loses focus, of the present. The statement - *I don't know what is going on in that person's head or mind* was often used (in some form of context) as a blanket statement by many of the participants to indicate that focus on the present moment will be maintained as opposed to giving – in to the distraction of what is perceived as a generally negative reaction, which may or may not be based in reality. It should be noted that many of the participants' indicated that they still had the ability to get angry when necessary, they had practiced to not become consumed by anger and to manage or regulate their anger and that the mindfulness was a factor in this process. Alwin 33 (self-taught) mentioned the processes that occur when

he is faced with a stressful situation and how he has learned through mindfulness methods to manage these situations.

I still go from 0 to 60 when I am angry about something, especially when I am driving. But the mindfulness brings me to a place where I can regroup and take control of myself, and bring myself back to a place of more stability and peace. For example, when someone cuts me off, and I am in that centered place, I will just laugh. Ah, these people are crazy. If not, I will get angry and speed up and try to cut them off -crazy. So, it is definitely beneficial to me. Even when I do my jogs a couple times a week, that is sort of a meditation time for me. So I can really stay focused on reviewing of that is going on in the week and my actions and interactions. I focus on what's going on in the world and how I feel about it and if something pops up where I am upset or really angry, I will try to regulate myself. Like I was sharing how some of the things that are coming out around the election, I was getting really upset. I reframe and try to keep myself focused and centered and use those sort of mindfulness techniques, if that makes sense.

William 43 (MBSR) conversed about the processes of acceptance, control, and space when faced with a stressful situation in which control of that situation may be minimal to nil for an individual.

I think before I started (the mindfulness meditation); I think that I was probably more reactive to external things. I would focus on things that would bother me that were beyond my control. But now I am able to recognize when that is happening and giving you a little space to see things as they are and accept things and be more accepting of things that I cannot control. I don't let them bother me as much. And I think this practice ... if you look at some of the videos - when they stop African Americans, some people

immediately react and start yelling at the cop. If you are in a lion's pit, you don't talk to the lion, and I think that this practice will allow people to have some more emotional control to recognize that I don't have the upper hand in this situation and this person probably has some bias against me. I need to stay alive in this situation to go fight another day in court rather than be reactive. And that is one thing I find that leaders in the African American community don't talk about. They talk about what's going on with the cops. You can't control the cops. So, when you are in that situation, the best thing to do is to control yourself. And then you fight the battle later. And I guess that people feel disenfranchised and they can't fight that battle and react that way. But I think that mindfulness will kind of help people step back a little bit. And I am not trying to blame the victim because some people have said that is what you are doing. No, this is about staying alive. People are getting killed. That's an aside.

Malcolm 30 (self-taught) stated that a benefit of mindfulness meditation is the development of the ability to regulate emotional impulses.

I meditate so that I can stay grounded. If I don't meditate, I get lost. Internally, I look at the definition of maturity as one's ability to delay the time between a thought or an impulse and reacting. So, that is why I meditate. And there are lots of scientific studies that show that that is a huge benefit of meditating. A thought can come into your mind. Your mind does not have to necessarily follow it – go down that path. An impulse can come you do not have to necessarily react, and that delay can be strengthened, and that delay is huge. With me and my highly addictive personality, if I am at a bar that delay helps with, do I want to get that actual drink? Or in other situations when I am driving, and I feel that coming up because someone cut me off – that delay – this thing is huge. I

could get pulled over depending on how the cop is talking to me, that delay is everything. It's maturity. When I am practicing, I can literally see the emotions emerging within me. When I am not practicing mindfulness, and when I am not meditating I don't see it until I am consumed. So I don't see the anger until I am furious and then it's just furious. But with the mindfulness meditation, I can see it develop and I can kind of like internally shift attention to be fully present with that and to be there with it rather than just let it take control, and that's for everything thoughts and emotions.

Edward 61 (MBSR) converses about the acceptance and then the release of stressful situations.

Just kind of being able to see things for what they are, and as I mentioned before and not going with the story in my head. Even my driving, you always want people to drive the way you want them to drive. So, when I am driving I still go what the F.... but I let it go after that. I don't take it on for two or three blocks. So I am able to have a reaction, but I don't get it here in my chest. I just see things for what they are and let them go.

Steven 47 (MBSR) communicated how he self-regulates a stressful situation

And if I feel stress or somebody is pushing my buttons, just while I am there looking them in the eyes, I could be breathing and all of the while I can be bringing everything down. I am bigger than this provocative word that you are throwing at me – whatever it may be. I can bring myself right on down, right in that person's presence. And they don't even know what is going on.

Lloyd 33 (self-taught) talked about the concept of being constantly present and aware while others appear to be unaware and the difficulty of regulating this dynamic.

I think that if you are not paying attention, you could not be pissed off. But if you are aware and paying attention, you have way too many reasons to be pissed off. There are several times a day that I can sit back and “A,” not fucking hurt somebody. And there are several times a day if I can just like be ... you are unaware of what you are doing right now? A perfect example is, I am taking my co-parent and our two daughters to the movies and like I have the tickets on my phone, and the guy is scanning the tickets. I mean there is me, my oldest daughter’s mother and our youngest daughter and this Asian woman comes up from behind and like the dude is actively scanning our tickets and she kind of goes in between them to try to hand him tickets. So, I go like – “yo” yo”!

You don’t see us right here! It is kind of like there is this quality of not being seen and not being valued that we are saturated in. And at that moment it was like I had to definitely give her some bass – yo back-up! And then I had to go and laugh about it with my girls and point it out. You all saw that - right? You are going to engage with this. It’s real. Call it out and then don’t let it bother you past taking care of it. Right. I got fiery. It got taken care of. She backed up like oh, oh and then it was over. I think that those are the stressor folks talk about, micro-aggressions that occur all day. Like, we bathe in them.

6. The Mindful Child

Overwhelmingly, the data indicated the emergence of a theme in which the participants responded positively to the notion of the introduction to mindfulness meditation practices at an early age. All of the participants agreed that there would be a strong possibility that boyhood experiences could have been either “better” or “more”, for example - if I had received this instruction as a child I would have been – a *better*

listener, I would have had *more* patience (with myself and others) and I would have had *more* confidence in myself. Within the data, none of the participants responded in a negative manner, which would have indicated that mindfulness meditation practices would not have been helpful if introduced at an early age.

Alwin 33 (Self-taught) states that-

I would have been more easy-going and laid-back. I would not be so quick to come to a place of frustration and anger. I would be able to constantly keep myself centered. If these practices had been introduced to me as a young child

Wes 48 (MBSR) mentioned that that the introduction of mindfulness meditation practices at an early age may have made a difference with self-acceptance.

In terms of difference- a better listener, more attentive, more thoughtful in responses.

If this had occurred as a kid, I might have been more comfortable with myself, more accepting, more patient, more forgiving of things that we do as adolescents, as young men.

Edward 61 (MBSR) reflects on how the introduction of mindfulness practices as a child may have impacted his future relationships.

I think that all of my relationships would be better. My relationship with my dad, for example, I am just able to kind of realize where he is coming from. And to just take that into consideration and just how I deal with him. I think that I would have been able to pay more attention to the relationship – understanding how the other person feels. You know just a simple sentence that someone would say to you – that you may just gloss over and never consider. In mindfulness, you just take the time to pay attention and listen to

hear what somebody is saying. Even with my wife – just to be kinder to my wife, to take a minute not to react so fast to the stuff that she does that irks me.

Malcolm 30 (Self-taught) spoke of peace and confidence, as factors that may have occurred if he was inducted to mindfulness meditation at an early age.

That's a great question because I was thinking about that, was it yesterday? – I was thinking about this a couple of days ago. I know that I am a young man, but I don't feel like it. I guess that it is normal at this age. I have only existed for thirty years. I've always been like a younger person. So now I am not. I am a young man. But I am a man now I am not a kid. I can feel it in the way that I think and interact with the world and the way in which I process things. So, it's different than what it was. Kind of what the Bible says – "when I was a child I acted like a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things." But with that being said, this is a new place. Yes. I think that I would be in the same place. I would have had a lot more peace. I am getting to this point where I am a young man now to have more peace about how I am wired, and I just feel like I missed a lot of years where I was beating myself up trying to be less sensitive than I actually am. I mean like for young men it is not easy being highly sensitive and highly reactive. So over the years, I have learned a lot of different, like coping techniques but I still did not have a lot of peace. So I would have had a lot more peace. I would have been a lot more confident, in knowing that everything – the way that I interact and process living in this world that, that is normal rather than me thinking that there is something wrong, that I was a punk. Or that I should try to change. There is nothing to change. The idea of just being a human being – just be. It's okay. I wish that I would have known that. I would have had a lot more peace.

James 54 (MBSR) talked about the possibility of greater retention and focus

I think significantly different just for example in thinking of myself; I was always a pretty good student in school. But, I got it done get it over with. I was very short termed. Here is a good example. I couldn't finish a baseball game. I played baseball, and around the third or fourth ending, I am quitting. I was already off to the next thing. And I never associated it. As I got older, I found out that I liked the stimulation of hockey, the contact. That is how I got into the tree industry. I liked that stimulation. And then when I went to college the first couple of years I had a phenomenal GPA. And that was all she wrote. I started noticing my retention. I could not focus in the classroom for long. I would go to class and half-way throughout I noticed that my interest was gone. Once I realized that I had ADD and looking back over my life, I do wonder how much different my life would be if I learned to be present, whether I was playing sports or studying. I do wonder. Even now over the last year of practice, I have come to appreciate the tree work, again. I have learned to enjoy the moment. And since I have just begun to experience it – I do think I will introduce my daughters to it.

Lloyd 33 (self-taught) conversed about the possibility of a heightened sense of awareness, which may have caused better outcomes in several areas.

Introduced it in a way that it made sense to me right - knowing that I liked it is key. Because I am constantly seeking that. I teach kids every week from first grade to 6th grade. I think if I ... especially as I am practicing it now I mean a physical awareness and a physical embodiment I would be able to do so much more with my body and then I would have this ability to check in with myself if I was getting upset, if I was feeling strongly and not making sense of it I'd know that hey I can go and sit down and I can breathe and find a process of like using my breath to gain more awareness of what's

going on. I think so because that is what I try to do with my daughter –like breath, like sit down, like slow it down. Slow down the beginning of your breaths, slow down the beginning of your exhales. And then use that – why are you feeling this way. I mean that the breath is so amazing because it connects us to our two nervous systems. We have a sympathetic – parasympathetic, I always mix them up, one is rest and relax, and one is fight or flight. A slow breath will drop you into rest and relaxation whereas there are so many things that are pulling us out of that – right. Just “A” all of these electronics that are around they are on the wavelength of that fight or flight. And being surrounded by them - cars, trucks and traffic, we have so many reasons to rise into this fight or flight that is not a healthy place for mammoths let alone humans. Our goal is to be at rest and relax the majority of the time and when you need to step into fight or flight and not always be in stress. So, yes. It would have given me a tool.

Stanley 52 (MBSR) also spoke of the possibility of the future benefits of self-awareness (from a child to an adult)

Oh wow. I think that they would have had a significant impact. In fact, in our class there was a young lady, she was a teacher, and she was taking the class for like the third time because she was teaching it to her students. These were young kids – elementary class. And I thought that that was great. I wish that I would have got that kind of training. Because one of the things that you kind of learn through mindfulness or you become more self-aware of is that, the issues that you have now as an adult, you have always had them. And they were probably more manageable as a kid because you did not have to worry about paying bills and car payments and all of that kind of stuff. And as you grow older and your life becomes more complex and more and more issues, and your childhood

remedies don't work anymore. So, Yes I think that it would have made a big difference. It would have been a coping mechanism over the years. I probably would not have gotten to the stage that I got to where it was almost like chronic.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study is to add to the knowledge base of the experiences of African American men who practice mindfulness meditation on a regular basis as a method to buffer psychosocial stress. An examination of four interconnected topics: the disproportionate amount of psychosocial stressors that impact African American men on a daily basis, a review of the mindfulness meditation experiences of these African American men and if these experiences buffer the psychosocial stressors, does the experience of mindfulness meditation lead to a perceived state of well-being as a result of the mindfulness meditation practice and does the regular experience of the practice of mindfulness meditation increase individual connectedness/relatedness?

In this chapter the following areas will be discussed: a discussion based on the themes that emerged from the data, the theoretical linkage of the themes, limitations, implications for social work practice, mindfulness in social work practice, future research and the conclusion.

A DISCUSSION BASED ON THE THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE DATA

The noted capacity to intentionally conceptualize, integrate and operationalize mindfulness meditation principles and techniques into various societal experiences within their chosen environments in connection with the use of self-regulation may have helped buffer psychosocial stressors for this particular group of African American men. The ability to accept and to be aware of the actual reality of one's environment may have also enabled these particular participants to successfully maneuver themselves within multiple social environments.

The overwhelming use of many mindfulness modalities to enhance the noted benefits of mindfulness meditation practices indicated the strong desire by many of the participants to integrate the benefits of mindfulness meditation, such as: awareness, focus, attentiveness, multiple perspectives, patience and presence within their day to day routines, in any environment they chose to inhabit. Therefore, if one can successfully integrate the benefits of mindfulness in yoga, weight lifting, eating, walking and running, it is likely that these same processes were active and useful in other elements of the participant's lives, particularly those elements which were stressful in nature. As indicated by the participants, many of the principles of mindfulness had been used in the workplace in terms of addressing stressful challenges and with the process of completion of work in a more efficient mindful manner.

This intentional integration is also noted in how many of the participants chose to address their current psychosocial stressors more on a micro level, be it – dealing with a contentious relationship with two different mothers of two different children, having to locate extra funds in a short period of time to send a child to college, or worrying about who will eventually take care of elderly parents. From a review of the data, it appeared as if the integration of mindfulness principles were operationalized in all of these cases as a buffer. The buffer may be a regulatory process that encouraged them to be aware, to also stay present and most importantly to give themselves distance – emotionally, and mentally in the process (in the mist of whatever stressful experiences had occurred) and then proceed.

The emergence of - mindfulness promotes self-regulation as a theme from the participants in relationship to their mindfulness meditation practice is substantial to this study.

The first line of defense to combat the disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors may, most likely, be the process of the promotion of self-regulation. Self-regulation places a great deal of responsibility back on the individual as far as taking control and responsibility for one's behaviors, emotions and choices especially in terms of decision making processes, in whatever environment he may occupy. The ability to self-regulate gives one the choice to exert energy towards what he can control, which is himself.

In terms of well-being, the participants noted that well-being was more of a challenge to obtain for African American men, but not totally unattainable. The challenges appeared to be related to circumstances more on a macro level (due to racism and white privilege). Once again, it appeared as if the intentional integration of principles and techniques of mindfulness meditation along with the enhancement of the concepts of emotional and mental self-regulation enabled awareness and acceptance of the differences. To dwell emotionally and mentally for extended periods of time when experiences occurred, that had the potential to negatively impact their well-being, did not appear to be an option for these participants.

The emergence of the theme that indicated the possible desire and the need to cultivate principles and techniques of mindfulness during boyhood from the participants could also be viewed in terms of well-being. The ability of the participants to vividly recall their retrospective experiences indicated that the psychosocial stressors that were experienced during this developmental stage (ages five to twelve) could have also been buffered by the mindfulness meditation practices, which may have achieved the experience of a more consistent state of well-being for the participants, when they were boys, adolescents, and young adult men.

The data did not indicate an increase in relatedness due to mindfulness meditation practices however what was noted was the participants' ability to remain aware, present and connected in their more intimate relationships with family.

THE THEORETICAL LINKAGE OF THE THEMES

In this section the theories that were explained in the chapter -*Theoretical Framework*, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development (stage four) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) will be reviewed and discussed within the context of the themes that emerged from the data: 1.) many mindfulness modalities, 2.) racism is experienced as a barrier to well-being, 3.) applying mindfulness at work, 4.) primacy of relational stress, 5.) mindfulness promotes self-regulation, and 6.) the mindful child. This discussion is an attempt to explore the linkage between the concepts noted in the literature review and the above theories in connection with the lived retrospective experiences of the participants, in relationship to mindfulness meditation practices, psychosocial stress, well-being and relatedness/connectedness.

Self-determination theory (SDT)

The selection of SDT as a theoretical framework occurred as a result of the research for the literature review and as a consequence of the themes that emerged from the data. The sections "Many Mindfulness Modalities", "Mindfulness Promotes Self-regulation," and "Applying Mindfulness at Work" are the themes that emerged from the data in the findings which appeared to connect with the various principles of SDT and theoretical concepts from the literature review.

Many Mindfulness Modalities – the participants discussed different modalities of mindfulness meditation that they utilized. It was remarkable to observe the emergence of several methods to practice mindfulness meditation, as opposed to the traditional seated method. Many of the men explained how the mindfulness meditation was implemented into other activities, such as yoga, running, weightlifting, hip-hop music, apps and a Muse Headband. What really stood out was the overall indication of enthusiasm towards the practice by the participants from both groups (MBSR and Self-taught) and the level of individualism (or autonomy) to attempt the practice of mindfulness meditation (in the first place) along with the innovativeness to expand on this new experience.

One of the main components of SDT is the focus on the individual and the choices that one makes in reaction to the events within his environment. This enthusiasm is noted by the participants towards the practice of mindfulness meditation, which gave the firm appearance of a certain kind of motivation and autonomy and the need to become competent in the practice and this observation appeared to be linked to intrinsic motivation, which is one of the main principles of SDT. Autonomy is said to be essential to the development and substance of intrinsically motivated actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). “The intrinsic need for competence and self-determination motivate a continued progression of pursuing and trying to overcome optimal challenges” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 32).

Mindfulness Promotes Self-regulation - The participants mentioned that the regular practice of mindfulness meditation made them aware of the need to step back, to give space and to not be so reactionary to every situation. William 43 (MBSR) – “*I notice a lot more things. I am not as reactive to things. I am more measured. I can make a choice as to how I respond to*

different things. I pay attention more. Those are key things.” Self-determination theory: ... “the knowledge of insightful self-confirmation of action, in turn, impacts behavioral regulation, personality, integration and life-span development” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). And “the psychosocial hallmark of self-determination is the flexibility of the management of the interaction between oneself and the environment” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38). It should be noted that significant research has connected mindfulness with heightened autonomy and self-regulation, with their related benefits (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007).

Applying Mindfulness at work - The participants communicated that the mindfulness meditation techniques were implemented in their work as a method to reduce the stress associated in the workplace, such as acceptance (of situational outcomes), presence, patience, and self-regulation. Theoretically, the utilization of the above elements indicated a correlation between the tenets of some of the core principles of mindfulness that are repeatedly stated in the literature review and with the principles of SDT as previously mentioned by Brown, Ryan, and Creswell (2007), in relationship to autonomy and self-regulation. The use of acceptance, presence, patience and self-regulation are needed to basically assist the participants to safely (emotionally and mentally) make it through the workday.

The other manner in which the participants *applied mindfulness at work* is in the active integration of mindfulness techniques into their work. Langer (1997), Langer and Carson (2006) and Bishop et al. (2004) mentioned in the literature review of how the cultivation of mindfulness enables one to accept an “openness to novelty” and to view situations from multiple perspectives. The motivation of the participants to implement mindfulness techniques could also be considered intrinsically motivated in nature. Intrinsic motivation can also be seen as the

“inherent inclination to pursue novelty and challenges to extend and exercise one’s capacities to search, and learn” (Deci & Ryan, 2000 p. 70).

Erik Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development (stage 4)

The Mindful Child - Industry versus Inferiority (with its essential virtue of competence) is the fourth stage of Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development. This stage, which is between the ages of five to twelve, is reviewed due to the vast similar reactions in the data, in which the theme entitled the Mindful Child emerged. The participants voiced how life could have possibly been different if the concepts of mindfulness meditation had been introduced to them at an earlier age. Within the findings section, most of the participants mentioned that they would have been - a better listener, more confident within themselves and more patient – with themselves and others. One of the main principles of Erikson’s fourth stage of psychosocial development is that it is a period of a child’s life in which a child wants to prove that he can start and finish a task on his own and do so with confidence and develop a sense of competence with the accomplishment of each new task, either alone or with peers. Within this fourth stage, the belief is - “I am what I learn” (Erikson, 1980, p. 87). Erikson stated that he (the child) regulates himself to the rules of a productive situation (Erikson, 1980).

At first glance, the link to Erikson’s fourth stage of psychosocial development and the childhood developmental experiences of the participants would seem somewhat perplexing since the majority of the participants socioeconomic status appeared to be middle or upper class and many of them appeared to be successful in their chosen careers.

Throughout the interview process, many of the men expressed that in childhood they did not have to want for anything and all of them appeared to have had an appreciation for

education. This link is more of a focus on what could have occurred to make the boyhood experiences of many of the participants more consistent and tolerable. It appeared as if developmentally the participants received the needed support from home and caregivers to successfully move to the next psychosocial stage of development.

However, there were challenges in which the participants experienced outside of the comfort of home. The participants mentioned numerous experiences of conflict in school between peers of their own race due their elevated interest in education (e.g., “why are you trying to talk-white”). Or some of the participants experienced a sense of disconnection from their peers due to their choices to experience something different than most of the children in the community during this developmental stage, for example choosing to play ice hockey as opposed to basketball and not receiving a response that indicated a sense of relatedness from peers because of the choice (e.g. “you are an Uncle Tom”) or being bullied for being biracial. The participants discussed that the perceived benefits of mindfulness, which they now experience may have helped them buffer psychosocial stressors at an earlier age, to achieve the experience of both a more consistent level of well-being and a sense of industry and competency (as opposed to inadequacy and inferiority in certain environments) during this most crucial stage of psychosocial development.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)

Racism is a Barrier to Well-being – Many of the participants stated in the data that the path to well-being appeared to be more of a challenge for them as a group in comparison to other groups in American society. This observation was also noted in the *Introduction* section; Black men tend to be assessed and related to on the basis of erroneous assumptions and negative stereotypes, as opposed to their individual achievements or characteristics (Franklin, 2004).

Franklin further stated that these race related occurrences are thought to have significant implications for the general well-being of Black men (2004).

Although, most of the participants appeared to have managed to avoid many of the disparities presented in the *Introduction* section, the emergence of this theme is a direct link to one of the major tenets of Relational Cultural Theory. RCT is one of the few developmental theories that view the impact of socio-political and cultural disconnection on a person's emotional, mental and social well-being. The decision to use RCT as a theoretical framework was to underpin the substantial amount of statistics listed in the *Introduction Chapter* which supports that African American men appear to experience a disproportionate amount of psychosocial stressors. It also appears that there is broad socio-political disconnection between American society and African American men. Jordan stated that "racism, homophobia, class prejudice and sexism all enable chronic disconnections that causes pain and drains the energy from individuals and societies" (2009, p.6).

Within the tenets of SDT, there are what is known as "resilience factors against social environments that are not conducive to the obtainment of a healthy well-being" (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013, p. 272). Vansteenkisted and Ryan state that "among these resilience factors is the capacity to regulate behavior autonomously, even under threat or pressure; this capacity, in turn, is supported by awareness or mindfulness" (2013, p. 272). Studies have been conducted by Brown and Ryan, which have indicated that mindfulness, defined as open and receptive awareness is characteristic of features associated with autonomy (2003). Based on the content of their retrospective stories many of the participants appeared to present as autonomous men, and many have utilized the "resilience factors" previously mentioned by Vansteenkisted and Ryan

(2013), as a method to maintain a healthy consistent state of well-being, even among vast societal challenges.

Primacy of Relational Stress (Micro) - in terms of current stressors a theme emerged that clearly indicated that the participants did not share the same stressors. And the stressors that were noted were not exclusive to psychosocial stressors that would generally impact African American men. However, what was noted was that the stressors were relational in nature, and directed towards the cultivation of intimate connection with family members and the choice to provide of themselves to these family members. Mindfulness meditation principles were evident in the data that indicated that there was first acceptance and awareness by the participants of the stressors. The need to remain present and the utilization to view situations from multiple perspectives were operationalized to buffer the stressors. RCT also views how the concept of more intimate human connection is also needed. Jordan further states that “human beings grow through and towards connection” (2009, p.1). One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span (Jordan, 2000). It appeared that many of the participants are striving to achieve this level of relational development.

RCT integrated principles of mindfulness into its basic beliefs. Jordan, states that Relational-cultural mindfulness is a particular kind of mindfulness that suggest we extend our awareness and attunement not just to the passing parade of images and thoughts in our minds and feeling in our bodies, but we bring the meditation attitude of presence to our relational world as well (2009).

This is another area in which there appeared to be a link in the participant's mindfulness experiences and theory, many of the men expressed that the mindfulness meditation practice appeared to enhance their more intimate relationships.

In summary, a point does exist in which the three theories (SDT, Erikson's Fourth Stage of Psychosocial Development and RCT) interconnect and that is in the area of the obtainment of a sense of competence, throughout the life cycle. Erikson Fourth stage is time limited within the parameters of the ages of five to twelve. Parents and caretakers are to be watchful of the areas in which the virtue of competence can be gauged, encouraged and supported, in a child. RCT views the work of competence in terms of relational development throughout the lifespan (we work towards the process of the cultivation of growth fostering relationships). And SDT adds a third component, and that is autonomy, which is developmental and societal in nature. Deci and Ryan state that to work toward the achievement of constant and consistent mental health, three innate psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy must be aligned, promoted and supported by the societal systems (2000b). The author's further state that, when these psychological needs are fulfilled the emergence of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and well-being are satisfied, which in turn positively benefits human existences (2000b.) And as previously stated the development of self-regulated autonomy is supported by awareness and mindfulness (Vansteenkisted & Ryan, 2013).

LIMITATIONS

Like all qualitative research, the presented results are not generalizable to the experiences of all African American men who practice mindfulness meditation in an attempt to buffer psychosocial stressors, but to the unique group of fourteen African American men who

consented to participate in this particular study. The noted limitations of this study included: selection bias, lack of socio-economic diversity among the participants, variations in the length time and frequency of regular meditation practice.

The decision to select the majority of the participants (eight) from the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) interventions created a bias because the participants were formally trained in the mindfulness meditation techniques, which could have resulted in a possible increase in knowledge about the concepts of mindfulness meditation as compared to the Self-taught group of participants. It is possible that the stress related catalyst which initiated the participation in the MBSR intervention may have elevated to an urgent level, before enrollment in the course. So, any reduction of the initial cause for the catalyst for the intervention could be perceived as solely attributed to the practice of mindfulness meditation, without the acknowledgement of the impact of other factors. However, it should be noted that the Self-taught participants presented just as equally knowledgeable of the concepts of mindfulness meditation which may have been obtained by reading books and studying the concepts of mindfulness meditation via the internet.

As indicated in the demographic section of the *Findings Chapter*, most of the participants appeared to be middle to upper class in socio-economic status (MBSR & Self-taught).

Most of the participants were college educated with advanced and/ or professional degrees. And all of the participants indicated that they were employed. Although a certain socioeconomic status was not requested in the inclusion criteria, these factors may have generated different retrospective experiences of psychosocial stressors from African American men who practice mindfulness meditation who are unemployed and not as educated as some of the participants of this study.

The variations in the lengths of time in which the participants practiced mindfulness meditation may have been too broad. The minimum time indicated in the inclusion criteria was eight months. The length of time for the participants ranged from a minimum of 10 months to the maximum time of over fifteen-years. The participant's average length of time for participation in mindfulness meditation practices was two years. The limitation in this area is that it was not known if gaps existed in practice and if so - why? And the recall of the individuals who practiced longer may have been compromised due to the longer length of time involved in the practice. A more specific meaning for what was met as "regular practice" may have been needed. Although, most of the participants expressed that they participated daily in mindfulness meditation practices some of the participants considered shorter mindfulness meditation techniques to be just as effective.

Although these limitations may have occurred, the honest and heartfelt retrospective mindfulness meditation stories and experiences that were shared by the fourteen African American male participants will hopefully provide some additional insights as to how mindfulness meditation may be used as a buffer against psychosocial stressors along with some encouragement for other African American men to engage in the practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This dissertation will help increase the body of knowledge in the field of social work practice through the provision of this qualitative data from a group of individuals who are underrepresented in the literature, in the area of the retrospective experiences of African American men who practice mindfulness meditation and if the mindfulness meditation acted as a buffer against psychosocial stressors.

Another manner in which this dissertation adds to the knowledge base of social work practice is that the principles of mindfulness (e.g. patience, peacefulness, calmness, focus clarity of thought) and the tenets of Self-determination theory (SDT) were both heightened and brought to the fore front of attention for closer review and application. Through their shared retrospective experiences several themes emerged from the data. One theme stood out and needed to be brought to the forefront. The participants shared that through the process of mindfulness meditation a perceived sense of self-regulation of emotion and impulses had been established and had been successfully utilized throughout their day to day existence as a method to reduce stress, in multiple environments.

This particular finding may have implications for social work intervention in which the principles of SDT if operationalized (with implementation of the three basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy at school, at home and in the child's community) to assist African American boys (five to twelve years of age) through this critical stage of psychosocial development. As previously mentioned, this is the age in which the participants noted that they begin to experience psychosocial stressors which were directly and indirectly related to the challenges that existed mainly with peers in some of the environments, outside of the home, that they inhabited. The operationalization of the principles of SDT could be implemented by social workers (in schools, in the community and clinically) with all African American boys to ensure that the opportunity to participate in this stage of psychosocial development can occur without the experience of the historically noted chronic stressors.

MINDFULNESS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The field of social work practice could benefit from the use of mindfulness meditation for the well-being of the social worker. Social workers are employed to solve a multitude of

problems of individuals who are mentally ill, suffering with addictions or those who are incarcerated. Clinical social work is done with children, adults and the elderly. And social workers are in charge of large social service agencies and their knowledge is utilized in schools and communities.

Work with many of these individuals can be both rewarding and stressful. And many social workers do not maintain care of their emotional, mental and psychological needs in relationship to this often challenging and stressful work. Another manner in which this work adds to the knowledge base of social work practice is that the benefits of mindfulness meditation practices (attentiveness, awareness, presence, patience, focus and emotional regulation) can be implemented within numerous activities (as indicated in the theme - *Many Mindfulness Modalities*) and in any environment (as noted in the theme - *Applying Mindfulness at Work*).

Hicks indicated that social workers have begun to gradually implement certain elements of mindfulness in three areas: 1) as a matter of “self-care – looking inward” in which the principles of mindfulness are cultivated within themselves; 2) openly in their practice as an intervention within micro-practice (direct interventions with individuals, families and groups) and in mezzo and macro-practice (community and policy); and 3) as a means to positively affect the helping or therapeutic relationship between social worker and client (2009, p. 1).

FUTURE RESEARCH

The fourteen men who participated in this study stated on several occasions that they realized that they had been “blessed” and “fortunate” in terms of the fulfillment of most of their socioeconomic needs as children and adults. And many of the psychosocial stressors that were presented in the *Introduction Chapter* may not have directly impacted this particular group of

African American men. However, the data indicated that this group did experience psychosocial stressors (from racism and white privilege to concerns about the achievement of a balance between work and family and concerns that enough finances are earned to take care of their families). With that noted, more research needs to be conducted with a larger group of African American men who are of a more diverse socioeconomic status. This group could be formally taught mindfulness meditation. The minimum time span for what would be considered “regular practice” would be a year. This research could further determine if the experiences of the regular practice of mindfulness meditation enabled this particular group of men to buffer psychosocial stressors that are unique to them within their environments.

Although most of the fourteen men who participated in this study appeared to have experienced success in their chosen occupations, many of the men felt that they may have been even more prepared emotionally, mentally and socially to handle stress, in all of the stages of development leading up to adulthood, if they had practiced mindfulness meditation as a young child. Research is definitely needed in this area, exclusively with African American boys of various socioeconomic statuses. The dire statistics that are listed in Chapter One, in relationship to the disproportionate amounts of psychosocial stressors that impact African American men, may slowly decline. The parents (or direct caretakers) of these boys must also be a part of the study.

As noted earlier by Erikson, this stage of the psychosocial development (five to twelve years of age) is the most influential, at this stage the child is expected to complete a task by himself and within a group, working towards a sense of competency (1980). Therefore, the perceived benefits of mindfulness meditation may provide a different lens for these boys and

their families as to how to address psychosocial stressors in the environments in which they inhabit. The young African American boys and their parents should also be formally trained in mindfulness meditation. Once again the research should focus on the experiences of the boys and their families after a minimum of one year of practice, the outcome of these experiences should provide insightful and valuable data, in terms of the types and the impact of psychosocial stress on the lives of these individuals.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to add to the knowledge base, through qualitative analysis, about the experiences of African American men who practiced mindfulness meditation on a regular basis and if this practice enabled them to buffer psychosocial stressors. The study provided fourteen men the opportunity to tell their retrospective mindfulness meditation stories within the interview realm of three domains: the methods to cultivate mindfulness, the impact of mindfulness meditation on well-being and the regular practice of mindfulness meditation and its use as a buffer to the psychosocial stressors in your present life. What I found to be most impressive about this group was their profound knowledge of the practice of mindfulness, their sense of seriousness and humor when telling their stories and their sincerity, humility and honesty.

Many of these men either before or after the interview session were curious about other African American men who practiced mindfulness meditate. Within the interview process, the question was asked: “Do you know other African American men who meditate”? And that question was answered “no” 13 times. The men who participated in the MBSR course mentioned that, they were the only Black male in their respective classes.

Within the Literature Review section, the benefits of mindfulness meditation are presented, and the participants also presented their retrospective experiences of these same benefits back to me throughout the interview process without prior knowledge of the contents of the *Literature Review*. Most of the men stated, I feel more: aware, alert, calmer, patient, present, peaceful, acceptance of the present moment and in control (emotionally and mentally). These are considered mindfulness processes.

Various categories emerged from the data which created the following themes: many mindfulness modalities, mindfulness promotes self-regulation, applying mindfulness at work, racism is experienced as a barrier to well-being, primacy of relational stress and the mindful child. Although all of the themes are very relevant, as previously mentioned the emergence of the theme mindfulness promotes self-regulation is tremendously significant to this study, especially in terms of a definitive answer to the research question: *Do African American Men Experience their Mindfulness Meditation Practice as a Buffer against Psychosocial Stress?* The answer to that question is most likely – yes.

However, how does this happen? What makes this happen? The participants shared their retrospective experiences as to how and what happens to buffer psychosocial stress. What drives the buffer? It appears that through the mechanisms of mindfulness meditation, such as presence, being still, focused attention on the movement of your lungs, your nostrils as you intentionally take a deep breath when your awareness indicates stress or the fact that you are heading towards a situation that will lead to stress. These concepts can all be considered regulatory in nature.

This mechanism is operationalized as self-regulation due to the control you have or are working towards cultivating, to not give-in too easily to impulses (emotional, mental or

psychological). Through the process of mindfulness meditation, you eventually learn to give space and distance between you and a potential threat. That is the buffer.

A threat can present itself throughout our day-to-day existence at various levels of severity, for example: eating copious amounts of sugar when you are a diabetic; saying something mean spirited to your wife and children; taunting, teasing or punching a classmate because he behaves and looks different than you; repeatedly embezzling funds from your company; or planning with some friends to rob someone with a gun that you recently acquired. It is through the cultivation of the processes and the mechanisms of mindfulness meditation that one can learn to self-regulate (any of the above examples), which when operationalized buffers you from the psychosocial stressor. Once again, the concept of self-regulation offers you the space, the distance the buffer between you and a potential threat, to stop and process the choices that one makes.

As a social worker with over 25 years of experience, it has always troubled me to view throughout the years similar types of statistics that are mentioned in the *Introduction* section. If there ever was a group who would benefit from the practice of mindfulness, it would seem to be African American men. The findings of this study indicated that the benefits, processes and the mechanism of mindfulness meditation are a work in progress for these fourteen African American men, with the hope of connection with other African American men.

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Appendix A

Interview questions:

THE METHODS TO CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS

1. Explain in full detail what mindfulness means to you?
2. Where, when and how were you introduced to your chosen instruction for mindfulness meditation practice? (e.g. formal instruction – a mindfulness based stress reduction intervention, books, the internet - web based instruction, informal methods-from a friend, family member or DVD instruction).
3. What methods do you use to cultivate mindfulness – mindfulness meditation, yoga meditation or transcendental meditation?
4. How long have you used this method?
5. Do you shift between methods and how often do you practice this method?
6. How long do you practice and where do you practice this method?
7. Tell me what lead you to your chosen mindfulness practice? Was there a particular catalyst or event?
8. What is different about your life/ your life experiences when you practice versus when you don't practice?
9. How would your life have been different if someone had introduced these practices to you as a child?
10. Why do you meditate?

11. Describe in full detail what meditation means to you?
12. Do you meditate as a method to cultivate mindfulness, explain in detail? (explain cultivation)
13. Explain in full detail what occurs mentally and physically when you practice mindfulness meditation?
14. Explain how you feel after you practice?
15. Can you recall what your life was like before you started your mindfulness meditation practice?
16. Do you know other African American men who meditate – how long have you known this person (or persons) and do you share your mindfulness meditation experiences?

HOW DOES YOUR REGULAR MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PRACTICE IMPACT YOUR EMOTIONAL, MENTAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING?

17. What does well-being mean to you? (I may have to define well-being). Describe your present state of well-being?
18. What does well-being mean to you in terms of being an African American man is there a difference – explain?
19. How would you compare your present state of well-being with your past state of well-being before your participation in regular mindfulness meditation practice?
20. How does the regular practice of mindfulness meditation impact your emotional well-being? (give examples of emotional impact) – explain in detail.
21. How does the regular practice of mindfulness meditation impact your social well-being? (give examples of social impact) – explain in detail.

22. Do you feel socially connected in American society as an African American male, explain in great detail?
23. Does the practice of mindfulness meditation make a difference in how you interact or connect with your community?
24. How does the regular practice of mindfulness meditation impact your mental well-being? (give examples of mental impact) – explain in detail.
25. Are you able to recall your emotional, mental and social well-being before your cultivation of mindfulness meditation practice? If so, please describe in detail.

DOES THE REGULAR PRACTICE ON MINDFULNESS MEDITATION BUFFER THE PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESSORS IN YOUR PRESENT LIFE?

26. What is your definition of stress?
27. What is your definition of psychosocial stress? (I may have to explain and give examples, e.g. . racism, national disparities in education, employment & health care)
28. How do these psychosocial stressors directly impact you as an African American man?
29. How often are you confronted with psychosocial stress (daily, weekly or monthly)?
30. What are the main psychosocial stressors in your present life?
31. Does the regular practice of mindfulness meditation buffer the psychosocial stressors that impact your present life, explain in great detail how this occurs?
32. Is the management of these psychosocial stressors different since your regular participation in mindfulness meditation practices describe in detail how it is different?

33. Do psychosocial stressors have an impact on you in terms of how you think, feel and socialize with others in your environment especially those who are close to you? Please explain in great detail.
34. Does the practice of mindfulness meditation buffer psychosocial stressors in terms of how you think, feel and socialize with others? - describe in detail.
35. How did you manage the psychosocial stressors in your life before your cultivation of mindfulness meditation practice?

DEFINITIONS:

Mindfulness - The moment to moment awareness of purposefully paying attention. Mindfulness is also the awareness that occurs by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994).

Meditation – the practice of turning your attention to a single point of reference. It can involve the focus of the breath, bodily sensations, on a word phrase known as a mantra. Meditation also means turning your attention away from the distractions of thoughts, to focus on the present moment (Kabat – Zinn, 1990, 1994).

Cognition – information processing, such as attention, perception, learning, memory, thinking problem solving, decision making and language.

Emotion – any short-term evaluation of an affective, intentional, psychological state including happiness, sadness, disgust and other feelings.

Mental – relating to the mind of the process of thinking (explain cognition)

Psychosocial Stressors – psychosocial stressors result when we view a perceived threat to our lives (real or imagined) and determine that it may require resources that we do not have.

These threats may occur in the following manner: threats to our social status, threats to our social esteem, disrespect, non-acceptance in a group, threats to our self-worth or a threat that we have no control over.

Well-being – the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g. contentment and happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g. depression and anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and

positive functioning – in simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

Consent Form

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

I am a doctoral candidate in the DSW program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Policy and Practice. This interview will be part of my research for my doctoral dissertation. If you should have any questions about participation in this interview, please let me know immediately.

What is involved?

The interview will last between an hour and an hour and a half. I will make an audio recording of the interview, and I may write notes.

I will ask you questions about your regular mindfulness meditation practice, psychosocial stressors, and well-being. I will ask you questions connected to your regular mindfulness meditation practice and if this practice has enabled you to buffer some the psychosocial stressors present in our society. I will also ask you questions related to the achievement of emotional, mental and social well-being and if that well-being is associated with your participation in regular mindfulness meditation practice. Before we start the interview, I will ask you demographic questions such as your age, educational level, occupational title, marital status and if you have children and how many. If the interview is conducted by phone or Skype, I will email you a consent form, before the interview and await the return of the consent form (via Adobe software) which will contain your electronic signature.

Confidentiality:

The information you share will be kept strictly confidential. I will not share information about whether or not you have participated in this project with anyone. I will never use your name, other personal identifying information or information about where you live or work in my write-up of the interview.

Nothing with your name or other identifying information will be turned in to my instructor. I will blot out your name on this consent form before I turn in the final assignment. I am the only person who will be able to listen to the audiotape. Once I have transcribed the audiotape, I will destroy the recording. I will analyze the transcript from the interview, having removed anything that might serve to identify you, including geographic locations and names of particular

individuals you might mention in the recording. Any document with your name on it, which includes this signed consent form will be maintained in another locked file cabinet which will be separate from the transcript text of your interview, and the password protected laptop. Once this process is completed, I will destroy the consent form.

Risks of participation:

The risks of participation are minimal. The ways that confidentiality will be protected have already been described. In the unlikely event that you find that what you discussed in the interview is upsetting to you after the interview is over, please be in touch with me. I will provide you with some names and numbers of individuals or agencies that can provide further assistance.

Benefits of participation:

Although being interviewed will not help you directly, it is also possible that having a chance to share your story will be an interesting and possibly a rewarding experience for you. In addition, your participation will help to educate me on how to engage in strong qualitative interview research in the future.

Payment:

If you decide to participate, you will be given a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card when the interview is completed. You will also be reimbursed for any money you spend to travel to the interview site.

If you have questions about the project after the interview is over, please feel free to contact me:

Thomas E. Owens, MSW, LSW, M.S. my cell phone number: 267-918-5110, email address: owenst@sp2.upenn.edu

If after you talk to me and you still have concerns, you can contact the professor who will supervise this work:

Ram A. Cnaan, Ph.D.
University of Pennsylvania
School of Social Policy and Practice
Caster Building
3701 Locust Walk
Philadelphia, Pa 19104-6214
215-898-5504

Your participation is entirely voluntary:

You do not have to participate in this project. There will be no negative consequence if you decide not to participate. No one, other than me, will know if you have participated in this educational project.

If you decide to be interviewed today, you can stop the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

By signing this consent form, you have indicated that you have had all of your questions about the interview answered to your satisfaction and that you have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant printed name: _____ Date: _____

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer printed name: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer Signature: _____ Date: _____