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David E. Landry
Flow in the Therapy
Setting: An Examination
of Optimal Experience in
Clinical Social Work Practice

ABSTRACT

This study's purpose was to understand how licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience when they are engaged in clinical practice. The specific focus of this study was to conduct interviews to obtain subjective narrative descriptions of these experiences. The question was based on the theoretical model of flow, a state of mind where one is wholly absorbed in the moment. Data reflected that the social connection between the therapist and client was the strongest indicator of optimal experience. Data from this study showed evidence that participating licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience in practice within the same language framework that Csikszentmihalyi (1988) and contemporaries used to define and explain flow. The data adds to existing qualitative studies in which optimal human experiences are described using the language framework of flow theory. Therapeutic applications of flow through mindfulness and visualization practices are explored in the discussion section of this paper.

**Flow in the therapy setting: An examination of optimal experience in clinical social work
practice**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2015

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A felt path to completion

*Gratitude, Acceptance, Courage, Strength, Confidence, Anger, Boundaries, Esteem, Empathy,
Actualization*

A very special thank you to Jean Russell and the entire staff for helping me along the way.

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Finally, a note to a friend: As paths diverge, trust and hope lead the way.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This research explored the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) and its potential relevance for clinical social work practice. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines *flow* as a state of mind when the individual is wholly absorbed in the moment. He descriptively explains flow as the optimal state of inner experience an individual can have. He bases this assertion on four decades of research connecting absorption in the moment to feeling fulfilled to the full extent of one's capability. He elaborates on the definition of flow thusly:

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives. A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual. (p.6).

This study's purpose was to understand how licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience when they are engaged in clinical practice. The specific focus of this study was to conduct interviews to obtain subjective narrative descriptions of these experiences. These narratives were examined for common and divergent thematic data and their comparison

with current literature on flow. The narratives were also examined for possible associations with participant demographic data.

A body of research on the merits of flow theory being incorporated into clinical work is beginning to be created (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); however, no research on how clinicians described their optimal experience while clinically practicing could be found. The data from this study might help clinicians become familiar with the theory of flow and reflect on flow in their own work. Additionally, the potential insights obtained from this data may be applicable to helping clients create flow in their own lives.

Flow Concepts and Descriptions

Foundations. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a former Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago (1985-88) after leading various departments and committees at the University of Chicago since the mid-1970's, and he is the founder and current director of the Quality of Life Research Center at Claremont Graduate University.

He began research in the 1960's to better understand creativity, the conditions under which life flourishes even amidst hardship, and the nature of motivation when a task is done for the enjoyment of doing it. As he developed his ideas about flow, Csikszentmihalyi studied Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud and their ideas on the psychological structure of the mind and how it mediated conflict. He was fascinated by Freud and drew parallels between the ego defense of sublimation (Freud 1930) and flow yet gravitated towards Jung's work because of his ideas around positive human experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Jung, 1969). Jung said that when individuation occurs the individual becomes harmonious, mature, and responsible. The individual develops an understanding of human nature and the universe and becomes autonomous, self-actualized, and whole (Jung, 1969). Csikszentmihalyi understood this to mean

that a person could move beyond the process of sublimating libidinal energy into acceptable behaviors and recognized that there can be a pursuit of a higher order of being beyond our primitive instincts. Flow research was also influenced by Abraham Maslow's term *peak experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Peak experience is described as a euphoric mental state, often experienced by self-actualized people, that leaves the individual with broader and deeper awareness (Maslow, 1964). In describing peak experience, Maslow (1962) p. 67 states, "Think of the most wonderful experience of your life: the happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music or suddenly 'being hit' by a book or painting, or from some creative moment."

Csikszentmihalyi states that flow produces a sense of exhilaration, energy, and fulfillment that exceeds the enjoyment of everyday life and that when one invests attention in goals that are not driven by genetic impulse or cultural expectation new opportunities are created for the self to grow. The individual begins to participate in those activities that promote growth and joy simply for the opportunity to be involved and will attempt to recreate this state of mind because it is preferred and consequently the experience builds upon itself. Csikszentmihalyi goes on to say that the evolution of our consciousness depends on this pursuit of flow.

Flow was given its name because of the consistent response of those who described it as an experience of being carried through an activity, as though by the current of a river, in a way that required no conscious effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This corresponds with principles in Buddhism and Taoism that describe the "action of inaction" or "doing without doing" (wu wei in Taoism). Flow has strong roots in these eastern philosophies as well as in the teachings of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle (Compton, 2005; Myers, 2000). The discipline of Hatha Yoga

corresponds to several aspects of the flow experience and may be the oldest and most systematic way of entering flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Research. Following his original publication on flow, “Boredom and Anxiety” in 1975, Csikszentmihalyi and his contemporaries studied narrative descriptions of subjective experiences that were given by a diverse group of individuals participating in a broad range of activities. These narratives were obtained by conducting interviews around the world ranging from North America to Europe, Australia, East and Southeast Asia, and many indigenous cultures therein. In addition to the narratives, the experienced sampling method was used to collect data about inner experience by utilizing beepers that paged individuals at random times throughout the day to prompt them to answer a variety of questions related to their emotional and cognitive dispositions. The data suggest that the phenomenon termed flow is an experience that transcends social class, race, gender, age, and modernization of civilization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); and it can be experienced in work, play, relationships, meditation, everyday tasks, spirituality and any other activity that one could conceivably participate in (Sawyer, 2011; Walker, 2010).

A set of conditions and characteristics were common in the narrative descriptions of personal experiences and the data from experienced sampling method questionnaires (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi designated these conditions and characteristics as the foundational elements of flow and multiple researchers as cited below have supported the validity of these designations.

The *conditions* for flow are as follows:

- Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, exist that stretch existing skills without overmatching or underutilizing them. The individual has a sense that he/she is engaging

challenges at a level appropriate to his/her capacities (Massimini & Carli, 1988; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

- Clear goals exist and the individual has a sense that progress that is being made towards those goals. Individuals are considered to have clear goals when they have a planned intention (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Walker, 2010).
- Unambiguous feedback exists which facilitates progress towards goals. This feedback is consistently received, internally or externally driven, and can be subtle or direct (Ullen, Manzano, Almeida, Magnusson, Pederson, Nakamura, Csikszentmihalyi, & Madison, 2011).

The *characteristics* of flow are as follows:

- Concentration on the task at hand: this is defined as attention to the extent that one's focus is wholly invested in an activity and extraneous aspects of life are forgotten (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).
- Transformation of time: when individuals direct full attention to what they are doing in the present moment they fall into a rhythm with an activity and the progression of action is only marked by the rhythm itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
- A merging of action and awareness: an individual becomes spontaneous and automatic. The person no longer is thinking of self and instead fully integrates state of mind with behavior (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Sato, 1988).
- A loss of self-consciousness: there is not enough attention left over in the moment for either the past or future to be considered. This is often accompanied by a sense of union with the environment (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Macbeth, 1988).

- A sense of control: individuals feel they can handle any challenges that emerge. This sense of control is more precisely defined as the self-perception that one is in control rather than the reality of whether or not they actually are (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Logan, 1988).
- Autotelic experience: the participation in the activity is driven by intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as occurring when the experience of the participation is the primary reward for involvement in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Jackson & Marsh, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 1985).

Relevance of Conditions and Characteristics to this Research

These conditions and characteristics will be enumerated in further detail in the literature review. Every condition and characteristic may not be present in a flow experience because of the demands of an activity. For example, the loss of self-consciousness may not be experienced in clinical practice because of the clinician's desire for mindfulness of factors such as transference and countertransference.

Participants were asked to self-select into the study by reviewing a refined list of flow conditions and characteristics and identifying if they had an experience in clinical practice where the conditions and characteristics were present. The refined list is outlined in the Methodology section of this paper. A refined list was used to make self-selection less complex. The conditions and characteristics were acknowledged as being part of flow theory. In the beginning of the interview, participants were read the below example narrative of how one might describe an optimal experience. Participants were then asked to describe their optimal experience in clinical practice. The term optimal experience was clarified to participants as being an experience when they felt at their best.

The following vignette is taken from the work of Allison and Duncan (1988):

When I stop to think about it I realize that an important part of this state of mind is enjoyment. I get so involved in what I'm doing, I almost forget about time. When I experience this state of mind, I feel really free from boredom and worry. I feel like I am being challenged or that I am very much in control of my action and my world. I feel like I am growing and using my best talents and skills; I am master of my situation. (p. 121)

Summary

This research was conducted by interviewing licensed clinical social workers who identified having a flow experience in clinical practice. The participants were given specific conditions and characteristics of flow to guide them in self-selection. At onset of the interview, all participants were read a narrative describing a flow experience. The narrative was identified as an example of how one might describe their optimal experience. Participants were then asked to talk about their optimal experience while conducting clinical practice. Because the purpose of the study is to better understand what subjectively constitutes an optimal experience in clinical practice, it was made clear participants were not obligated to discuss the details of client sessions. The interview was structured this way to alleviate any concerns about patient confidentiality. The research objectives were to examine the narrative data for common and divergent themes as well as identify possible associations with participant demographic data. The narrative data was also compared against current literature on flow.

Significant research exists on descriptions of flow in multiple vocations and activities. However, very little information is available about flow specific to mental health practitioners and their work in clinical settings. Discussions about the potential uses of flow theory in clinical practice are also sparse. The data from this study might help clinicians become familiar with the

concept of flow and reflect on flow in their own work. Additionally, the potential insights obtained from this data may be applicable to helping clients create flow in their own lives.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Overview of the Concept of Flow and Key Terms

Csikszentmihalyi's 1975 publication, "Boredom and Anxiety" introduces the term flow, and he has studied flow over the past four decades along with colleagues such as Lefevre (1988), Jackson and Marsh (1996), and Fave (2009) to name a few. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines flow as a state of mind when the individual is wholly absorbed in the moment and more fully defines flow as:

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives. A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual. (p.6)

This review will explore the concept of order of consciousness, development of self, the conditions of flow, the characteristics of flow, social flow, critiques of flow, measurements and empirical evidence of flow, and therapeutic applications of flow.

Order of Consciousness

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that *order of consciousness* facilitates and precedes flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi consciousness can be conceptually divided into three main parts: attention, memory, and awareness. Attention is the process of taking notice of information that is available, memory stores the information, and awareness interprets that information (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Broadbent, 1958; James, 1890 as cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When attention, memory, and awareness all work successfully towards the same goal, order of consciousness is achieved (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Each flow experience leaves the consciousness more ordered than it was before because each experience builds upon the last (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This idea is based on the concept of *emergent motivation* that says what happens in any moment is a response to what happened immediately before it within the context of interaction with the environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Psychic entropy is a term used to describe the turmoil caused by states of consciousness that conflict with the self's goals. This "noise" in the information processing system is often experienced as emotions such as anxiety, fear, jealousy, confusion, and boredom (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The opposite of psychic entropy is *psychic negentropy*. This is also known as flow. When the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and senses we give attention to and create memories of are conducive to the goals of the self, our awareness of these processes creates the conditions for true enjoyment and harmony (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Attention. What individuals attend to will determine the contents of their consciousness and therefore becomes the information they reference in future experience (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Attention can be thought of as *psychic energy* that is required to make any other mental process occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Entering flow is a function of how

attention has been directed in the past and how it is focused in the present based upon interpretations of structural conditions of the environment. Staying in flow requires that a limited stimulus field be maintained (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Eysenck (1982) as cited in Csikszentmihalyi 1990 writes:

The original notation of attention has been replaced by a conceptualization in which attention is regarded as a limited power supply. The basic idea is that attention represents a general purpose limited capacity that can be flexibly allocated in many different ways in response to task demands. (p.28)

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that it is this flexible allocation that represents higher order functioning in human beings. It also means that humans can create opportunities to direct our attention towards goals that promote flow. Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi (2012) state that the features of activities become richer when attention involvement is high and it can benefit the individual not just by what they are focusing on, but also by taking focus away from elements of consciousness that might be negative.

Memory. Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that subjective experiences fill one's consciousness. These researchers note this is an important point because flow theory is based around the idea that how an individual perceives environments and their skills influences quality of experience more than objective, external measures. These subjectively interpreted experiences that comprise one's memory allows consciousness access to more information than it can attend to in any given moment by storing the previous experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Bandura (1970) described these memories and new perceptions as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel. It is memory that is drawn upon when an individual develops perceptions because each new impression and judgment is referenced against prior ones

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Thus, in flow theory, this allows the individual to use memory to direct themselves towards flow opportunities and to recall prior states of the mind that can be duplicated through cognitive and emotional recall (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Awareness. Awareness can be thought of as the processing unit of one's consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Processes that occur include identifying stimulus, categorizing it in terms of previous experience, and handling it either by keeping it in conscious memory or forgetting it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Some of the most important parts of awareness are cognition, emotion, and volition. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that *cognition* refers to how pieces of information are recognized and related to each other, *emotion* refers to the disposition that consciousness takes towards information as it digests it, and *volition* is the process of how attention remains focused as opposed to moving on to new stimulus. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) ties together order of consciousness in this way: "These three subsystems, attention, memory, and awareness serve to allow consciousness to act as a buffer between genetic and cultural instructions on the one hand, and behavior on the other" (p. 20).

Development of self

At a certain point in development, as the individual realizes a capacity to direct attention, remember, think, feel, and have will, the self emerges into awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi states that this emergence is consciousness becoming aware of itself. When the self brings together the entirety of consciousness, including those unconscious contents that occasionally surface into awareness, it's primary responsibility becomes protecting the system (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The self then begins to represent its own interests in terms of goals. As such, attention, memory, and awareness can be used to replicate states of consciousness that are

conducive to well-being and eliminate those that are threats. These sought after states of consciousness can be thought of as goals that the self pursues (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Thus, knowledge of flow and its benefits can aid the self in making meaning and goals in life. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that the emergence of meaning in the self can be described through a gradient model with increasing complexity. He goes on to say that an individual can begin by identifying and preserving the self; then when safety is no longer a concern, the individual can turn attention away from self and expand horizons with the goal of embracing values of the community; following this general integration with the outside world the individual turns self inward to develop individualism and promote growth; and finally using the information obtained from previous stages, the individual can decrease self-contemplation and seek to integrate with other people and greater meaning in an autonomous way. The activities one participates in that fulfill this meaning often are activities that promote flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Differentiation and Integration. After the flow experience, the organization of the self is more sophisticated. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states, “a complex person is one who is able to access precise, discrete information, and yet is able to relate the various pieces to each other” (p.250). In more simplistic terms this can be described as growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This is the result of two different processes, *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation refers to a movement towards what is unique and separate about one’s self from others. Integration is about uniting with others, ideas, and entities outside of the self. The complex self is able to be successful by combining both of these tendencies.

Flow aids in differentiation because when a challenge is overcome a person is left feeling more capable and skilled. This invariably leads to the addition of new awareness of capabilities

and ability for independence of the self, and increases the complexity of one's being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The person that develops unique skills, who takes their own counsel, and who is independent and autonomous is more differentiated (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Flow aids in integration because in states of deep concentration one's consciousness is well-ordered and self-doubt is reduced thereby giving more energy to focus on the environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Connection with and relation to the environment is essential for maintaining flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

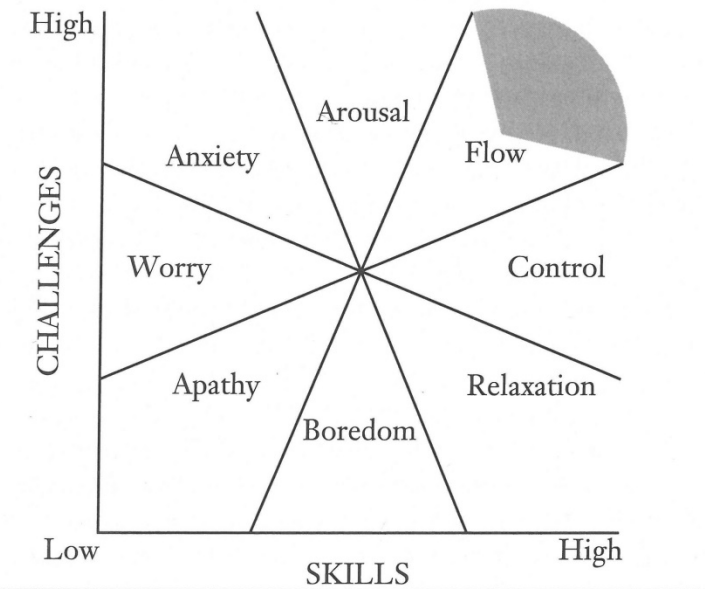
With a better understanding of order of consciousness and the development of self in place, the foundational elements of the flow experience will be discussed. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) designated the following conditions and characteristics as the foundational elements of flow and multiple researchers as cited below have supported the validity of these designations.

Conditions of the Flow Experience

Challenge-skills balance. The challenges/skill balance sets the stage for flow (Massimini & Carli, 1988) and finding a positive balance between challenges and skills is essential (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi state that challenges and skills should increase in complexity as stages of an activity progress. For instance, the runner who nears the end of the marathon may be drawing on a different or refined skill set to meet new challenges brought on by the terrain and length of the race. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that skills must grow in order to stay in flow; otherwise, when challenges cannot be surmounted anxiety sets in or when challenges become too easy boredom follows. It is the subjective, not objective, view of a challenge or a skill that is important (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and what a person thinks about available opportunities and his or her capacity to act will determine effectiveness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

The below flow diagram depicts how challenges and skill are related to flow and is taken from Massimini and Carli (1988):

Figure 1
The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. Optimal experience, or flow, occurs when both variables are high.



Sources: Adapted from Massimini & Carli 1988; Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

Clear goals. An experience is meaningful when it relates positively to a person's goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Goals provide the individual with focus and it is noted that an individual can have more than one goal during flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Flow theory does not suppose that people act the way that they do because they are always trying to fulfill a goal; rather when they do try to fulfill a goal they experience a sense of control that is absent when behavior is not motivated by conscious choices (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi state that in flow the goal is set in advance so the individual knows what they are doing. This clarity of intention helps block out distractions and eliminate doubt about one's choices. Visualization can be a very useful tool to employ before

embarking on actions and can help create a feeling of anticipation that the outcome will be positive (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Unambiguous Feedback. Knowing moment by moment how things are going is a key component of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). There are a variety of ways that feedback can be experienced in flow. The body provides a kinesthetic awareness of where it is in space which gives the individual important insight into the quality of functioning during an activity (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The feedback one receives during flow can also be external (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). An example of this might be observing body language of someone else during conversation or listening to what someone says about your performance.

The feedback received during an activity facilitates attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). For instance, Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst (2001) state that empirical studies have shown that when an individual receives feedback that indicates negative performance errors were shown to increase. However, these errors can be mediated by an individual's ability to redirect attention to adapt and cope with the new challenges that are emerging (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

With an understanding of the conditions that facilitate the flow experience in place, the characteristics of the flow experience will be discussed.

Characteristics of the Flow Experience

Concentration on the Task at Hand. With clear goals in place, feedback to adjust to, and the knowledge that one's abilities are matched with appropriate challenges, attention becomes critical to maintaining flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The individual needs all concentration in order to execute the tasks at hand to the level of quality that is required (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This aspect of flow pushes out thoughts unnecessary to

what is most relevant in the moment and order is imposed on the mind. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Transformation of Time. In descriptions of flow, time can both slow down and speed up (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). When time slows down, it allows individuals to see events clearly as they unfold. This helps one maintain a sense of control because there is a clear read on the environment and the challenges ahead. Others have described time as speeding up to the extent that it has passed before they are even aware of what they have done. Because of the demands of certain activities, the loss of time is not present in all flow experiences (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Action- Awareness Merging. The merging of action and awareness is described as the mind and body coming together into behavior that is not meditative in the moment (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Individuals have described this as not seeing or hearing anything outside of their field of attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). An acute sense of timing occurs such that reactions to feedback become spontaneous and the individual stops thinking about what he is doing and instead just does it. This has been described as the most telling indication of being in flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Loss of Self-Consciousness. Concern for the self goes away during flow and negative thoughts and worries recede (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). This is a function of there being no attention left over because it is absorbed in the activity at hand. When an individual feels in control of being able to handle whatever comes along, there no longer is a need to worry about other's perceptions or what it takes to be successful. Despite the lack of reflection in a flow experience, one's sense of self is stronger and more positive.

This characteristic of flow is closely linked with a merging of action and awareness. The loss of self-consciousness helps all attention go towards what one is doing and leaves the self with spontaneous and authentic actions and reactions (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Sense of Control. In this characteristic of flow, individuals feel heightened self-esteem as though they can handle anything that comes their way (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Control in flow is more about the perception that one is in control rather than the reality that they are. It is associated with total composure of self (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Empirical studies have show flow to be positively correlated with mental competence, overall performance outcome, and psychological skills (Jackson, et al., 2001). Csikszentmihalyi (1988) states that too much control of a situation or striving for control of a situation can push an individual out of flow.

Autotelic Experience. Studies on autotelic experience were a precursor to the development of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The purpose of these investigations was to understand why people perform acts that they find enjoyable without the benefit of material rewards to motivate them. Csikszentmihalyi states that autotelic experience is also referred to as intrinsic motivation in flow theory and is related to a tenant of Hinduism that extols the motive being in the deed not the event.

An intrinsically rewarding experience means that the process of the activity is what primarily motivates the individual to participate in it (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found that the same activities in which flow was experienced were found less pleasurable when they were not voluntary. Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) note that when behavior is motivated externally attention can shift to the self and it's shortcomings. This creates a self-consciousness that can be an obstacle to flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) states

that the enjoyment of the process rather than outcome also facilitates flow being sought after once it is experienced.

Social Flow

Social connection has been shown to facilitate powerful experiences of flow (Walker, 2010). Walker states that individuals in highly interdependent teams report more enjoyment in flow than individuals performing less interdependently. This may be because social tasks can require more skill and thus can be more challenging. Groups can do things that individuals cannot do by themselves and this requires a good deal of coordination. Highly engaging conversation was often cited in personal narratives about flow as being what brought the individual the most joy in their lives (Walker, 2010).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that we are biologically programmed to find other people as the most important objects in the world. Research shows that when people spend time with friends they have higher levels of happiness, self-esteem, strength and motivation (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Lewinsohn and Graf (1973) as cited in Csikszentmihalyi (1990) state that interactions with other people can improve mood for an entire day.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes:

It is in the context of intimate friendships that the most intense experiences occur. There are the kinds of ties about which Aristotle wrote, "For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." To enjoy such one-to-one relationships requires the same conditions that are present in other flow activities. (p.187-188)

Critiques of flow theory

There have been many attempts to describe and measure flow through empirical research. However, flow is difficult to conceptualize, operationalize, and collect data about when

conducting empirical studies (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992; Finneran & Zhang, 2005). Finneran and Zhang note that there is a lack of longitudinal studies and question the generalizability of what constitutes “optimal experience” from culture to culture; and Fave (2009) also notes that flow does not automatically bring about well-being. Kimiecik and Stein (1992) note that studies are sparse about how flow exists. This means that the underlying aspects of one’s state of being in relation to flow have not been studied enough to draw conclusive theories; however, Csikszentmihalyi (1988) theorized that order of consciousness is the framework to understand underlying states of being that promote flow.

Additional research utilizing the “experienced sampling method” (ESM) was conducted to collect data from individuals while they were engaged in a variety of activities (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Each participant carried a beeper and researchers would “page” them at random and various times throughout the day. Participants would then catalog what they were doing and how they felt by filling out questionnaires. This allowed for real-time data to be collected leading to the identification of conditions and characteristics that were reported as present when people identified feeling at their best. The ESM allowed data to be with lessened recall bias and provided a wealth of information about people through on the spot descriptions of individual’s states of being (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Ellis, Voelkl, and Morris (1994) raised concerns about the validity of the operational definition of flow used in ESM studies as well as the model of flow that the operational definition derives from. They argue that ESM studies using the Eight Channel model of flow (see figure 1 under challenge/skills balance section above) explain a very small proportion of the variance in the data and suggest that the model may not be the appropriate framework for interpretation of ESM data (Dean, 2009).

Csikszentmihalyi (1988) states that a criticism of flow is that it is a Western idea because of its emphasis around goals and activity. However, its principles have been influenced by Eastern sources such as Bhagavad Gita and Zen and comparisons between Taoist philosophy and flow have been drawn (Compton, 2005; Myers, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that while the content of the activities may vary from culture to culture, the dynamics of the experience are ubiquitous, evidenced by cross-cultural studies from around the world. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that cultural meaning systems can have a significant impact on goals and thus flow activities will vary.

Measures and Empirical Evidence of the Flow Experience

Jackson & Marsh (1996) developed the Flow State Scale which is a 36 item instrument that represents the conditions and characteristics of flow and used the instrument to study athletes' experience of flow. Their research indicates that the measures used for all the conditions and characteristics showed validity and reliability. The research indicated that clear goals, concentration on task at hand, sense of control, and challenge-skills balance were higher correlation factors (as compared to the other conditions and characteristics of flow) within the flow experience. A surprise finding was that autotelic experience was a secondary factor. This may be related to the athletic nature of activities that the population of the study were involved in. Taking pleasure in the athletic activity for its own sake may be taken for granted because it is a free choice exercise and highly goal directed. The transformation time and loss of self-consciousness were less correlate factors but did show statistically significant association with flow. A single flow score was obtained and considered relevant in the findings; however, the measures of the individual athletes' conditions and characteristics were more salient in terms of providing informative data than one overall score for flow.

Nielsen and Cleal (2010) state that flow in the workplace can lead to increased innovation. These researchers developed a nine-point scale that measured flow. They found that problem solving, planning, and evaluation were predictors of individual flow experiences and improved overall work place functioning. Rebeiro and Polgar (1999) found the experience of flow can help individuals understand the aspects of occupational performance, environment, and self that contribute to the flow experience. Bringsen, Ejlertsson, and Andersson (2011) studied flow in nurses and found that flow situations were present during medical care activities as opposed to administrative duties and that cognitive resources such as emotional regulation helped facilitate flow. The researchers found that taking breaks in the work day helped the nurses feel more alert and increased their capacity for emotional regulation. Gaggioli, Cipresso, Serino, & Riva (2013) state that flow results in optimized physiological activation. Studies on the biological effects that flow has on the body are sparse, but initial efforts indicate that flow promotes a type of stress that is good for the body.

Lefevre (1988) states that time spent in flow is shown to increase reports of quality of life, concentration, creativity, and positive emotions. Flow can also result in increased learning and exploratory behavior (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that students that regularly experienced flow had less anxiety than peers around academic activities and that they experienced higher self-esteem; it was also shown that time spent in flow was associated with diminished delinquency. Fullagar, Knight, and Sovern (2013) supported the assertion that flow was associated with lowered performance anxiety. An example of flow being incorporated into the school system is at the Key School in Indianapolis, IN. A curriculum has been created based on flow theory and a “Flow Room” has been incorporated that allows for the exploration of various aspects of intelligences. Using Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory on

multiple intelligences, activities were designed that best allowed for exploration of each of these intelligence types thereby increasing the opportunities for students to find their best skills and consequently increasing the chances of optimal experiences (Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The researchers state that the keys to optimal learning environments are academic challenges that are relevant to the student and an atmosphere that promotes positive emotions by providing opportunities for advanced skill utilization, control of the learning process, and high activity level.

Therapeutic Application

Flow was a core influence in the development of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which is a theoretical framework that has been shown to be highly effective in promoting well-being (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) collaborated to write a paper in introducing Positive Psychology:

A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless. The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living. Hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance are ignored or explained as transformations of more authentic negative impulses. (p.5)

Positive Psychology theory has established its scientific roots through study and course work at institutions such as Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, Claremont University, the University of Texas, Boston University, and the University of Chicago to name a few. This theoretical approach is being used to help clinicians in the mental health field

complement current treatments, not to replace them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson, 2009). Positive Psychology suggests that negative and positive emotions exist side by side and that the negative is not “turned” into the positive or vice versa (Keyes, 2002 as cited in Malinowski, 2013). Thus, having treatment that enhances happiness and creativity is as important as having treatment that focuses on accepting and managing anxiety and sadness. These positive emotions can have a therapeutic effect on the after-effects that negative experiences impart (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000). Primary interventions include activities that increase gratitude, recognition of positive attributes, and awareness of positive experiences.

Moore (2013) noted that mindfulness with the purpose of increasing flow is an activity that may be useful in therapeutic settings. The connection between mindfulness and flow was empirically studied in college students, and those who had a history of mindfulness practice also had dispositions that facilitated flow. These dispositions were marked by creativity and cognitive flexibility. These findings are supported by Diaz (2011) and Malinowski (2013). Art therapy can also be an activity that has therapeutic implications for flow given that it lends itself to continuous challenges and creative opportunity (Chilton, 2013; Griffiths, 2008).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that cultural values can have an impact on how individuals experience flow. One of the cultural impacts of flow is that individuals will seek out flow experiences and thus promote the popularity of certain activities. For example, Crook (1980) states there is a link between a psychological selective mechanism that obeys its intrinsically motivated goals and cultural change based upon the pursuit of those goals. This has the potential to bring about widespread cultural change. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that flow theory can provide a blueprint for how institutions can be reformed so as to make them more

conducive to optimal experience. The primary way this can occur is to reevaluate the role external rewards play in our view of what is successful.

Summary

Flow was given its name because of the consistent response of those who described it as an experience of being carried through an activity, as though by the current of a river, in a way that required no conscious effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi states that flow is widely considered to be a positive state of functioning. He also notes that it is a subjective state and there are significant differences in terms of the intensity and quantity of flow across personality types. The data suggest that the phenomenon termed flow is an experience that transcends social class, race, gender, age, and modernization of civilization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Support is evident that flow has an impact on cultural evolution (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Flow is a concept that is difficult to operationalize yet research has made possible the identification of characteristics and conditions that are empirically supported as being part of the experience (Finneran & Zhang, 2005). Flow theory has been successfully incorporated into workplace, academic, and athletic settings amongst other environments (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Potential applications in therapeutic settings have been developed and are considered successful in increasing quality of life for those in mental health treatment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Seligman, et al., 2006).

Chapter III

Methodology

This qualitative exploratory study's purpose was to collect narratives about what constitutes optimal experience in clinical practice from a sample of licensed clinical social workers. These narratives were examined for common and divergent thematic data. The thematic data was examined in relation to participant demographic data, and it was discussed in relation to the current literature on flow. It was desirable to use a qualitative, exploratory approach because a description of optimal experience in clinical practice would be highly subjective. This methodology allowed for freedom in participant responses as well as latitude in the type of interviewing questions, with the intention of providing deep, rich, and nuanced findings. Additionally, this flexible methods approach using interviews allowed for multiple perspectives and a variety of experiential interpretations as well as insight into internal processes (Anastas, 1999). It also allowed for the possibility of discovering new concepts that might more accurately capture the variation of the central phenomenon (Strauss, 1987). The methodology was based on grounded theory which offers "flexible, successive analytic strategies for constructing inductive theories from the data" (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008, p. 240, as cited in Frost, Nolsa, Brooks-Gordon, Esin, Holt, Mehdizadeh, & Shinebourne, 2010.) The data from this study might help clinicians become familiar with the concept of flow and reflect on flow in their own work. Additionally, the potential insights obtained from this data may be applicable to helping clients create flow in their own lives.

Sampling

The sampling method used was a non-probability purposive snowball approach. The sample size was 8 participants. The original goal was to include 10 participants. The population for this study was licensed clinical social workers in or around a New England city. Inclusion criteria was that, at the time of the study, the participant was a licensed clinical social worker, was seeing clients in clinical practice, self-identified as having had an experience in their clinical work that met a definition of flow, worked in or directly around a specific New England area city, and were willing to be interviewed about their views on optimal experience in clinical practice.

Flow was described for participants through the following refined list of conditions and characteristics based on current literature and enumerated below. Participants were informed that these conditions and characteristics were elements of flow.

The conditions for flow are as follows:

- Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, exist that stretch existing skills without overmatching or underutilizing them. The individual has a sense that he/she was engaging challenges at a level appropriate to his/her capacities (Massimini & Carli, 1988); Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).
- Clear goals exist and the individual has a sense that progress that is being made towards those goals ((Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Ullen, et al., 2011; Walker, 2010).

The characteristics of flow are as follows:

- Intense and focused attention on what one is doing in the present moment such that the individual often loses a sense of time; attention is defined as

concentration to the extent that one's focus is wholly invested in an activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

- The participation in the activity is driven by intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as occurring when the experience of the participation is the primary reward for involvement in an activity (Ryan & Deci, 1985; Jackson & Marsh, 1996).

The population for the sample was obtained by contacting, in person, four independently licensed social workers at a college mental health center where this researcher is currently interning as part of a Masters in Social Work program. These social workers were informed of the nature and scope of the study and asked if they would like to receive an email (see Appendix A) explaining the research further. In the email sent to the college mental health center social workers, the researcher identified himself as a Smith College graduate student in the School for Social Work who was conducting a study as part of a thesis to examine optimal experience in clinical practice. The contents of the email included the refined conditions and characteristics of a flow experience enumerated above. The informed consent (see Appendix B) form for the study was attached to this email.

The social workers from the college mental health center were asked to forward this email to any of their colleagues they thought might be interested in participating in the study. They were also asked to inform colleagues by word of mouth about the study. One social worker gave the researcher two email addresses of colleagues and they were contacted directly by the researcher via email. This researcher was given other names by one of these individuals. This researcher found several other clinicians in the area through networking with social workers from a previous job in community mental health. Recipients of the email, including the original

four college mental health social workers, were asked to respond to the email if they met the inclusion criteria and wished to participate in the study. There were 12 respondents to the email but only 8 respondents could find time to participate in the study. The locale for interviews was either the participant's office or a private room at a local library. Participants were presented with the primary option to meet at their office for their own convenience.

Ethics and Safeguards

Procedures were followed based on the rights and privacy of participants as outlined by the Human Subjects Review guidelines at Smith College. Additionally, the study was conducted in accordance with the NASW code of ethics and Federal guidelines for protection of Human Review Subjects.

The informed consent form (see Appendix B) gave information about the purpose of the study, my role as the researcher, and the nature of the study including the potential benefits and risks of participating. The participants were asked to bring a signed copy with them to the interview. The forms were provided at the interview as well. The researcher kept a signed copy and participants kept a signed copy. Assurance was given that the informed consent forms would be kept in a secure location or destroyed after the study was completed. Participant's names were not attached to their information. Code numbers linking social workers' transcribed narrative responses to their informed consent forms were used. Transcriptions and recordings were kept separate from informed consent forms. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents were stored in a secure location according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond the research duration, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

The potential benefits to participants were the chance to reflect on an optimal experience in the participant's work, gain information about flow, and "relive" an enjoyable experience.

There were no apparent risks in this study. Participants could withdraw from the study or decline to answer questions at any time. If a participant withdrew before the interview was completed all of their data was destroyed.

Data Collection

At the beginning of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about how the interview was to be conducted and how data was to be used. The study's purpose was clarified to all participants in terms of what "optimal experience" meant. This researcher clarified it as the experience of being at one's best. It was also characterized as an internal experience specific to the individual. Participants were asked for consent to be contacted after the interview if follow-up information was needed by the researcher. The interviews lasted between 30 – 60 minutes and were conducted between February 15st and April 10th at participants' offices. The data was collected by recording the conversations and then transcribing the narratives. A handheld Sony audio recorder and a phone application was used for recording purposes.

Bias that could have occurred during this study includes recall bias that could emerge from inaccuracies in the participant's memories of events. In the course of the interview clinicians were encouraged to share how their prior experiences influenced their current conceptualizations of optimal experience. This requires memory of prior experience and introduces recall bias. Additionally, this researcher has his own experiences of being in flow and those personal experiences could influence the direction of the interviews. Prior to the interview, social workers were exposed to the conceptual conditions and characteristics of flow that were

written by the researcher and obtained from current literature. This information could diverge from the clinicians' subjective interpretation of optimal experience. Because they were exposed to the current research on flow prior to the study, it could influence their own descriptions of optimal experience.

The four clinicians that were initially contacted for this study work at the college mental health center where this researcher is interning. All have a degree of supervisory capacity within the internship relationship. One of the social workers is this researcher's direct supervisor. There might have been group pressure to participate. Each clinician was aware that all four were being asked to participate in the study. They may have also felt obligated to help the researcher with this project. The potential for acquiescent response bias, the tendency to agree with the researcher's questions, also existed.

Participants may not have been completely revealing and forthcoming in the study because, despite safe guards for confidentiality, there may have been concern that peers would identify their responses. This could introduce social desirability bias, the tendency of the participant to give responses that will be viewed favorably by others. This researcher's relationship with each clinician could impact what they say in other indefinable ways. These concerns will be duly noted in the Discussion Chapter under "limitations of the study."

The snowballing sampling approach can be biased because it gives those with social connections a higher chance of being selected into the population (Berg, 2006). The self-selection method of obtaining the sample can be biased because there can be intentions of the participants for signing up that are unknown (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Given the non-probability sampling method and specificity of the population, the narrative data may not be representative of licensed clinical social workers in general.

The data collected from this study will be used to complete my *Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis*. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations. I have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on line training course prior to HSR approval. The certificate of completion is on file at the SSW.

Instrumentation. Demographic information was obtained prior to the interview. This included age and gender. Other demographic information was obtained by asking the participants the following questions: 1. Were you familiar with flow theory prior to this study? 2. How many years have you been in practice? 3. What is your clinical specialty? 4. Do you incorporate mindfulness practices into your clinical work? 5. Do you incorporate a spirituality centered approach into your clinical work?

A brief narrative taken from research conducted by Allison and Duncan (1988) describing optimal experience was read aloud by the researcher to begin the interview:

When I stop to think about it I realize that an important part of this state of mind is enjoyment. I get so involved in what I'm doing, I almost forget about time. When I experience this state of mind, I feel really free from boredom and worry. I feel like I am being challenged or that I am very much in control of my action and my world. I feel like I am growing and using my best talents and skills; I am master of my situation. (p. 121)

The clinicians were then asked to describe what subjectively constituted an optimal experience in clinical practice for them. As they talked about their experience the researcher asked for further details about responses the participant identified as especially important to their experience. If participants discussed elements of flow being part of their optimal experience, they were prompted to talk in more depth about these specific elements of flow.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach to data analysis was used (Thomas, 2003). The inductive approach is found across a variety of qualitative studies and provides a straightforward procedural way to analyze data (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Dey, 1993). The research objectives were to examine qualitative data for common and divergent themes and examine them for any possible associations with demographic data. Data was also examined for association with current research on flow. The taped interviews were transcribed so that themes could be identified across participant responses and so that examples of participants' responses could be used to illustrate findings. It was anticipated that the data from this study would help identify flow experience and its application to clinical social work.

Chapter IV

Findings

This study's purpose was to understand how licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience when they were engaged in clinical practice. This research was conducted by interviewing licensed clinical social workers who self-selected based on having had a flow experience in clinical practice.

The participants were given a refined list of conditions and characteristics of flow to guide them in self-selection. At the onset of the interview, all participants were read a narrative of a flow experience. It was described as an example of how one might describe an optimal experience or how they might feel when they are at their best. Participants were then asked to talk about their optimal experience while conducting clinical practice.

The narrative data have been examined for themes that are consistent with the nine conditions and characteristics of flow. Additionally, the data were examined for themes, such as memory, that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as precursors to entering the flow state. Themes, such as social connection, that might further enhance conceptual clarity of the flow experience in clinical practice were also examined.

The conditions for flow are as follows:

- Challenge/Skill balance
- Clear goals
- Unambiguous feedback

The characteristics of flow are as follows

- Concentration on the task at hand
- Transformation of time
- A merging of action and awareness
- A loss of self-consciousness
- A sense of control
- Autotelic experience

This researcher asked participants to describe their optimal experience to start the interview. Follow up questions during the interview were based upon the information participants shared. If they talked about a condition or characteristic of flow on their own, the researcher asked questions to better understand their experience. All of the conditions and characteristics were represented in the thematic material given by participants. The most significantly represented themes are as follows: In each instance that loss of self-consciousness was reported, a merging of action and awareness was also reported. Six participants shared that feedback and concentration on task at hand were present in their optimal experience. Seven participants stated that a sense of control was present in their optimal experience. Seven participants stated that memory played a role in facilitating optimal experience. All participants stated that social connection was a key element of their optimal experience.

Memory is a component of order of consciousness, the state of mind that precedes and facilitates flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). According to Csikszentmihalyi consciousness can be conceptually divided into three main parts: attention, memory, and awareness. When attention, memory, and awareness all work successfully towards the same goal, order of consciousness is achieved (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Social connection has been shown to facilitate strong experiences of flow (Walker, 2010). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that we are biologically programmed to find other people as the most important objects in the world. Walker (2010) states that social flow experiences are reported to be more enjoyable than solitary flow experiences and individuals in highly interdependent teams report more joy in flow than individuals performing less interdependently.

Demographic information was obtained prior to the interview. Five women and three men were interviewed. The age range was 32 – 53 years old. Length of time practicing was 7 – 20 years. Four clinicians had less than 8 years of practice, three of whom were also the youngest of those interviewed. It is noteworthy that these four clinicians presented themes related to clear goals in their clinical work, loss of self-consciousness, and a merging of action and awareness. The other four clinicians had between 13 and 20 years of clinical practice. Four of the participants were not familiar with flow, two participants were familiar with the concept but had not heard it called flow, and two clinicians were familiar with flow. One of the participants had a significant other who studied under Csikszentmihalyi. Six of the participants practiced mindfulness and two did not. Those that practiced mindfulness presented themes related to autotelic experience, a loss of self-consciousness, and a merging of action and awareness. Three clinicians had a spiritually based practice and five did not. Of those that did not, three explored spirituality if the client initiated the discussion. Those who had a spiritually based practice presented themes related to the experience of loss of self-consciousness and a merging of action and awareness during practice.

The following is a depiction of themes from the participants' narrative descriptions of their optimal experience in clinical practice. They are organized around the conditions and characteristics of flow and around the additional variables of memory and social connection.

Challenges/Skills Balance

Five participants discussed having a challenge/skill balance during optimal experience in practice. Narratives were consistent with prior research that says during flow perceived challenges or opportunities for action exist that stretch existing skills without overmatching or underutilizing them (Massimini & Carli, 1988; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The following are excerpts from the narratives of two participants:

- *I gain confidence by gaining new skills or having those in place be effective, the key is there feels like there is movement, growth – that is optimal experience – there is an energizing feeling.*
- *I'm present, energetic, and was a bit afraid of the social consequences of the relationship, but as things developed I used my skills to create a comfort zone.*

Clear Goals

Four participants discussed having clear goals during their optimal experience in practice. Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi (1999) and Walker (2010) state that in flow clear goals exist and the individual has a sense that progress that is being made towards those goals. Some participants described clients as driving goals and other participants discussed goals they created for themselves as professionals. The following quotes from two participants give examples of both:

- *I stay grounded in the session so I can work towards what's needed, being reminding about what the client is talking about, what are the goals of the work, what do they need, this helps refocus. It's conscious action.*
- *My goal was for it to be an alive, poignant moment, not scripted in terms of following a treatment model and allowing it to unfold in the room.*

Unambiguous Feedback

Six participants stated that feedback played a role in having an optimal experience in practice. Ullen et al. (2011) state that feedback from the environment helps flow continue and this feedback is often consistently received, internally or externally driven, and can be subtle or direct.

The following is an example from a participant stating that feedback was given verbally by the client and observed from the client's body language.

- *It can be subtle, it's observing their bodies, eyes, movement, openness of body and face, and how they look comparative to prior weeks. Some people clearly say what they are thinking or talk about an exercise we did that worked, it's how I know if I'm being helpful.*

The following is a participant response about feedback coming from what was happening in the therapist's mind or body.

- *My thoughts that are out of the moment are cues that bring me back, I use prompts, it's a feeling that confirms what's happening, I'm tuned into my own reactions. I think about my internal experience and use that to inform me where to go next.*

Concentration on Task at Hand

Five participants gave examples of having full concentration on what they were doing during their optimal experience in practice. Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that concentration of the task at hand in flow is attention to the extent that one's focus is wholly invested in an activity and extraneous aspects of life are forgotten. The following is a collection of responses from multiple participants highlighting this characteristic of flow:

- *I get excited when I make a connection, and when I can share it. It's the most gratifying feeling. Being in the moment, melding, constructing, understanding on a deeper level... I feel fully in the moment...I'm able to be right here and am consumed with the present.*
- *Trying to get that flow, that isn't always possible, but to get there you have to be focused and engaged in the moment... When I am focused 100% on the other person and not at all on myself it's a feeling of being tugged, pulled, drawn in.*

Transformation of Time

Five participants mentioned time being altered when they had an optimal experience in practice. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that when individuals in flow direct full attention to what they are doing in the present moment they fall into a rhythm with an activity and time can be best understood by the pace of the rhythm. The following are a collection of responses from multiple participants highlighting this characteristic of flow:

- *Loss of time is key... There is a forgetting of time...I also had this experience as an athlete, singing in a choir, doing art, I would get lost in it.*
- *Time slows down if I am connected to the environment. It's happening on its own and it helps me understand the true pace of time. I get a sense of there being enough time for myself and I bring that into the room with the client. It's not being rushed – a sense of calm accompanies it. Exercising helps me with this.*

Action/Awareness Merging

Five participants described an experience where their intentional thinking receded and their reactions became spontaneous or instinctual during optimal experience in practice. Sato (1988) and Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that in flow an individual becomes spontaneous and automatic when there is an integration between state of mind and behavior. The

following statements are a collection of responses from multiple participants highlighting this characteristic of flow:

- *There is an instinctual aspect when they (clients) bring in something new, you can tell they've come to it...I'm spontaneous and just thinking out loud...It becomes clear, a light opens up, you don't have to think...the intervention is in front of you.*
- *You're not thinking about what's going to come out of your mouth, it's free of any censorship or emotions that will get in the way of you performing. You didn't know it would happen, but it did, and it was perfect and appropriate for the moment.*
- *I am most me, but I am not conscious of self, the experience takes over, a huge part is enjoyment and there is a sense of purpose, it's always spontaneous...It's like music, when something great comes out of nothing and you weren't expecting it...there's no thinking.*
- *When the client becomes engaged there is no preparing for that, there is a building to that point, you just do what's feeling right...You get to moments where it's so clear what we should be doing now, before that things were feeling stuck, then responses become spontaneous and instinctual...the key moments have to be spontaneous...It's really exciting, a bit of a rush, getting lost in something, waiting for the moment and using it.*

Loss of Self-Consciousness

Five participants described losing self-consciousness during an optimal experience in practice. Macbeth (1988) and Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi (1999) state that a loss of self-consciousness occurs in flow when there is not enough attention left over in the moment for either the past or future to be considered. The following are a collection of responses from participants highlighting this characteristic of flow:

- *I'm calm, clear headed, focused, there is no internal dialog and a mirroring of the person occurs, it's a physical sensation... Letting go of all the other stuff in your life or in your mind, then the motivation for what you're doing right now is very high... I am focused 100% on the other person and not at all on myself... The experiences give me a lot of confidence, it's kind of enlightening. It happens in more than one area of my life, you realize how much we hold ourselves back with our perseverations and doubts, you realize how well the brain can function.*

Sense of Control

Seven participants described a sense of control as being an aspect of optimal experience in practice. Logan (1988) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) state that in flow individuals feel they can handle any challenges that emerge. This sense of control is more precisely defined as the perception that one is in control rather than the reality of whether or not they are. The following are a collection of responses from participants highlighting this characteristic of flow:

- *I had a meta-cognition going on especially when I started to cross over from feeling like a trainee to being more professional. I had this moment where I said to myself, you got this... They (client) trusted that I can manage what they are experiencing and whatever happens in the room... I had peaceful contentedness. I wasn't panicking. I was in control to the extent I needed to be or control wasn't an issue.*
- *Each of the optimal experiences build on the last, it's a confidence boost, there is rhythm to the work, there is a psychology to it that's true... (Confidence) is the culmination of lots of hard work. The best moments help you have more – you get on roll with a positive feelings. Maybe it's a good nights sleep or receiving positive reinforcement, or its about knowing what you're doing and being able to do it again with other clients.*

Autotelic Experience

Four participants discussed having an autotelic experience during optimal experience in clinical practice. Autotelic experience occurs when the participation in the activity driven by intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Jackson & Marsh, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is defined as occurring when the experience of the participation is the primary reward for involvement in an activity. The following are excerpts from the narratives of two of the participants who described this characteristic of flow.

- *Clients might not know it's happening, but for me it's why I do the gig. There is synergy, being connected in a job. It's exciting to be partnering. I'm fulfilled and engaged. The process is not always joyful or happy but some of most relevant and fulfilled moments aren't happy. I've done my job and they are moving along*
- *I have energy, purpose, I'm happy with what I'm doing, have hope. What I'm doing is worth it for the payoff of the feelings. I'm satisfied, a bit anxious depending on what's at stake, you know things might end (termination) if things are getting better so that can be sad.*

Memory

Seven participants discussed memory as being an important part of their optimal experience in practice. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that memory is a component of order of consciousness which is the state of mind that precedes and facilitates flow. Participants discussed how memory of past optimal experience helped create present optimal experiences in practice. They also gave examples when memory of their training or certain personal experiences helped facilitate optimal experience in practice. The following are a collection of responses highlighting this phenomenon.

- *It's an internal process, gathering memory during my focus, at times I intentionally do it and other times it will just happen... you're using parts of your brain that aren't usually available for use...it's long term memory, a piece of knowledge you haven't used in a long time... your brain remembers it on its own.*
- *Absolutely having exciting moments helps have others. You get a body memory of something feeling good. I started to get to know the difference between having a good, genuine, real therapeutic encounter and those that (weren't good). I was reenergized by the good moments...I'm interested, alive, deeply satisfied, content, engaged, stimulated, feeling it again seems like muscle memory, if I feel in once I'm likely to experience it again.*
- *I'm always drawing on my memory of clinical practice, times when safety was created, a sense that there was time for things to change, my own therapy experience I draw on to understand what they might be going through...I remember what happened two years ago, memory tells me that we'll get there (to our best experience).*

Social connection

All participants described a social connection being present in their optimal experience in practice. Social connection has been shown to facilitate strong experiences of flow. When people are working together they often report getting more joy from a flow experience than they would working alone (Walker, 2010). The following are a collection of participant responses highlighting this phenomenon:

- *It's about what I'm doing and the people that I'm spending time with...There is active listening with a good deal of empathy, when that is felt and attuned, it elicits the mutual connection, it creates that optimal moment.*

- *A positive response from a client is a mutual reflection, they are responding the same way I am to an insight moment. I had a click where I connected with a client and they are invested. There is a connection through dialog, a back and forth synergistic process of creating something both emotionally and linguistically. When things are meshing, it has to be with the client.*
- *The interconnectedness of all beings, we all have energy, we are feeding off each other's energy. I ask clients about it and say that my experience is very fulfilling and 9 out of 10 times they are as engaged in the experience as I am.*
- *There is a feed of energy between two people...I get excited when I make a connection, and when I can share it. It's the most gratifying feeling. Being in the moment, melding, constructing, understanding on a deeper level... I noticed the connectedness by feeling. I'm privileged and honored to be present.*

Summary

The research question sought to identify common and divergent themes in the narrative responses. Throughout the narratives the conditions and characteristics of flow were represented. Memory also played a significant role in participant's optimal experiences. At times participants used language that was primarily descriptive of one particular condition or characteristic of flow, but could also be interpreted as descriptive of other conditions and characteristics as well. Also, social connection was the most salient and frequently discussed factor in participant optimal experience in practice.

Participants found at times that it was difficult to put their experience into words. They seemed clear that they had experiences where they were wholly absorbed in the moment that left them intensely fulfilled yet had not previously reflected on them to extent that this interview

facilitated. Participants' responses became better articulated as interviews progressed. In light of participant responses about the power of social connection, it is noted that the social connection during the interview could have been a factor in this.

Chapter V

Discussion

This study's purpose was to understand how licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience in clinical practice. The question was based on the theoretical model of flow, a state of mind where one is wholly absorbed in the moment. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained flow as "optimal experience" based on four decades of research connecting absorption in the moment to feeling fulfilled to the full extent of one's capability. Flow theory is understood from previous research as having nine foundational elements called conditions and characteristics. Each of these conditions and characteristics have been shown to have validity and reliability in empirical research studies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Jackson & Marsh, 1996).

The sections of this discussion chapter are as follows: limitations of the study; inferences regarding flow theory and participant responses; implications for using flow theory in clinical practice; implications for theory, and finally, recommendations for future research.

Limitations of the study

Participants were exposed to the language of flow when they were given an abridged list of the conditions and characteristics of flow theory in the recruiting email introducing the study. This may have influenced the language they use in describing their optimal experience.

An additional limitation arose in the operationalization of the terms flow and optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) uses these terms interchangeably. However, it is recognized that the term optimal experience is highly subjective and open to interpretation. Along these lines, most participants asked questions about what optimal experience meant and asked the

researcher how they should talk about it. It was explained to participants as what their experience might be when they feel at their best. A vignette of how someone might describe a flow experience was read and it was identified as an example of an optimal experience. It is not known how the lack of clarity around the terms or the exposure to the vignette affected the study.

Another way to construct the research question might have been to ask clinicians how they would describe their experience of being wholly in the moment. In this scenario, no mention of flow or optimal experience would be made and the participants would not be exposed to any of the conditions or characteristics of flow. The vignette that was read to participants in this study would remain so as to serve as a guidepost for how one might conceivably describe the experience of being wholly in the moment but would not be introduced as a way to describe optimal experience or flow.

Some participants in the study were clinicians at this researcher's Smith College Masters in social work program clinical internship. Given that this researcher had a personal relationship with some participants their responses may have been different were their no prior social connection.

A potential issue in this study is that clinicians receive for compensation for providing therapy. Flow is often predicated on an individual participating in a task with the primary reward being the experience of the participation. Participants did state that they would want to provide therapy even if they were not being compensated, but it is not know how this difference would have affected their responses.

Given that the study only had 8 participants, the views expressed by participants may not represent licensed clinical social workers or the general population.

Inferences Regarding Flow Theory and Participant Responses

The data from this study showed evidence that participating licensed clinical social workers described their optimal experience in practice within the same language framework that Csikszentmihalyi (1988) and contemporaries use to define and explain flow. The data adds to a growing pool of qualitative studies conducted over four decades in which optimal human experiences are described using the language framework of flow theory.

The data supported Csikszentmihalyi's theory that order of consciousness is part of the flow experience. He states that when attention, memory, and awareness are directed towards the same goal, the mind is in the best condition for flow to occur. Clinicians strongly represented memory as being part of their optimal experience, and they cited the belief that attention was a key component of optimal experience. Two participants talked about how they believed attention and memory worked together to lead to an optimal experience.

Finally, findings supported Walker's (1990) work on the power of social flow. Participants noted a difference in intensity between individual flow and social flow in practice. Research supports that these are two different ways that flow can occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and that social flow is widely reported to be more enjoyable.

Condition/Characteristic Connections.

The conditions for flow are as follows:

- Challenge/Skill balance
- Clear goals
- Unambiguous feedback

The characteristics of flow are as follows

- Concentration on the task at hand

- Transformation of time
- A merging of action and awareness
- A loss of self-consciousness
- A sense of control
- Autotelic experience

The conditions and characteristics of flow that participants described in their optimal experiences were highly interrelated and often appeared to occur in a sequential way. It appeared that when flow occurred for participants in clinical work, goals came first. Participants expressed having goals for themselves as professionals that were consistently present in their practice regardless of what the client presented with. Memory was highly associated with the participant's goals in that they set standards for themselves based on their level of success delivering therapy in the past.

Progress towards the goal was facilitated by the challenge/skills balance and having clear feedback present. Participants described periods of being stuck while they sought to understand how to best help a client and during these times of uncertainty the best opportunities for the clinician to use skills presented themselves. During these challenge opportunities, feedback was seen as the key to reaching insight moments that created clarity in the treatment. It was these insight moments that often led to experiencing characteristics of flow. When insight moments occurred, participants reported feeling positive reinforcement that their clinical skills were effective and the resulting confidence triggered a sense of control. The feelings associated with this sense of control helped narrow concentration and elevated the participant's belief in capacity for skill utilization. Participants described a domino effect of a reduction in self-consciousness

when full attention was put in the moment whereupon a merging of action and awareness ensued that allowed their work to become more instinctual and spontaneous.

The glue that seemed to hold the flow process together was the social connection participants described having with their clients. It was likened to an exchange of energy that created a bond regardless of the stage of the treatment work, and insight moments were seen as more gratifying because they occurred within a social context. Participants described reflecting on their clinical work, often after sessions, and noted that the feeling of their optimal experience was the primary reason why they did the work. They acknowledged that it was their livelihood but indicated that they would want to find a way to get the experience even if they didn't do it for paid work. Thus, participants had autotelic experiences, meaning that the primary reward for their participation in the activity was the experience itself.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Clinician/Client Social Flow. Data from this study suggests that a social connection is very important in facilitating flow in clinical practice. While there will always be an inherent social connection simply because more than one person is in the therapy room, it may be helpful for clinicians to consider the factors that can be barriers to the natural social flow that would occur outside of therapy. These can include the exchange of payment for services, concerns about liability or safety on the clinician's part that may prompt caution in responses, or power dynamics that come into play due to the professional nature of the work. Anticipating and addressing these issues head on-just as one might address issues with race, culture, or gender-could be useful in breaking down barriers and making the most of the opportunity for social flow.

Utilizing Flow in Practice. Mindfulness is connected with flow, creativity, and cognitive flexibility; and research shows that individuals who practice mindfulness are more likely to have flow experiences (Moore, 2013). In many ways, this research study was a practice in mindfully leading participants through prior optimal experiences.

One of the stated benefits to participants was the opportunity to relive an enjoyable experience by talking about previous optimal experiences. Participants noted that prior to the research study they had not thought through their optimal experiences in practice to the extent that the interview facilitated. All participants felt that flow concepts were useful to think about, in terms of their personal and professional experience.

As was the case with participants, clients may not have reflected in detail on their optimal experiences or been made aware of flow concepts. Using mindfulness and guided imagery the client can be walked through previous flow experiences paying attention to the challenges that were present and what skills were used to master them. The client can stay mindful of what their primary goal is at any given moment and think about where feedback comes from and how it was absorbed and used to promote growth. By reflecting on the feeling states associated with the characteristics of flow, the clients can ground themselves in positive emotional states. The following is a narrative reflection of a flow experience that could be elicited from a client:

The client felt most connected to her own experience and was able to be fully in the moment when she was in a band in college. She described the experience of playing music with her friends as letting go and allowing her mind to become clear. When she began to create more complex rhythms her musical skills received recognition and a feeling of competency was created such that she felt in control of her world. Her action and awareness merged given that she wasn't thinking about what she was doing and instead was simply doing it. She noticed that

she was not reflecting on who she was or on aspects of her personality. The confidence she earned in this endeavor helped her believe that she could find rhythm in other parts of her life if she invested herself the same way she did playing music. She describes her experience in the band as an optimal experience in her life.

Recalling experiences such as the one above can be useful to the client in stressful situations. Memory was an important component in participant's optimal experiences and, from the participants' perspectives, often contributed to successful therapeutic outcomes. This was usually the case because they remembered prior instances where they were successful with their skills and they retained the feelings associated with that success. These feelings were recalled in new situations they faced and enhanced feelings of competency. One participant referred to this as "muscle memory" and said "when you feel it once, you are more likely to feel it again." Building on this idea of feeling recall, incorporating meditative exercises into therapeutic practice where the client focuses on a flow experience may enhance capacity to use the flow feeling states as a way to reduce anxiety and stress.

Future Study

As noted in the literature review, Kimiecik and Stein (1992) state that studies are sparse about how flow exists, and underlying aspects of one's state of being in relation to flow have not been researched enough to draw conclusive theories. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) theorized that order of consciousness is the framework to understand underlying states of being that promote flow. Given that flow has roots in psychodynamic theory and Csikszentmihalyi describes order of consciousness as resulting in a conflict free state of mind, a potential theoretical thesis could be an exploration of connections between flow, order of consciousness, and the conflict free zone in the ego theorized by Heinz Hartmann (1939).

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Appendix A: HSR Approval letter



School for Social Work

Smith College

Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 19, 2015

David Landry

Dear David,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Bruce Thompson, Research Advisor

Appendix B: _Recruitment email

The individuals that control their inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives.

Greetings,

My name is David Landry and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. This email is intended for licensed clinical social workers currently working in clinical practice in or around Rhode Island.

I am conducting a research project for my thesis to investigate what constitutes “optimal experience” in clinical practice. A theory on universal conditions and characteristics of optimal experience was created in the 1970’s and has been studied over the last five decades. This subjective experience is also known as “flow.”

If you believe you have had an experience during clinical practice that meets the following conditions and characteristics and would like to be interviewed about what you believe constitutes optimal experience in clinical practice, please reply to this email and I will contact you to set up a meeting.

- Clear goals exist and the individual has a sense progress is being made towards those goals.
- Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, exist that stretch existing skills without overmatching or underutilizing them. The individual has a sense that he/she is engaging challenges at a level appropriate to his/her capacities.
- The individual has intense and focused attention on what he/she is doing in the present moment such that one loses a sense of time; this concentration exists to the point that his/her focus is wholly invested in the activity.

- The individual is internally motivated to participate in the activity and the primary reward for his/her involvement is the opportunity to be involved.

If you would like to participate in the research, we would meet for one interview that will last between 30-60 minutes. I can travel to your office or we can arrange another meeting location. Interviews will be recorded but kept private and participation is confidential. Please be willing to be contacted via email or phone for any follow-up questions I may have after reviewing your narrative.

If you might be interested in participating, please review the attached informed consent form. You can also contact me by phone at 857-540-6875 if you have any questions.

Best,

David Landry

Smith College MSW candidate

dlandry@smith.edu

XXX-XXX-XXXX

Appendix C: _Informed Consent



Consent to Participate in a Research Study Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

.....

Title of Study: An examination of optimal experience in clinical social work practice

Investigator(s): David Landry

XXX-XXX-XXXX

dlandry@smith.edu

Graduate student Smith College for Social Work

.....

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study on optimal experience in clinical social work practice.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a licensed clinical social worker, are seeing clients in clinical practice, work in or directly around a specific New England area city, self-identify as having had an experience in clinical practice where the conditions and characteristics for flow were met, and are willing to be interviewed about your views on optimal experience in clinical practice.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to better understand what constitutes optimal experience in clinical practice from a clinician's perspective.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for *my Master's in social work degree*. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Meet with the researcher for 30-60 minutes on one occasion. Be willing to answer any follow-up questions that result from examination of narrative data. You will be asked to describe what subjectively constitutes an optimal experience in clinical practice and encouraged to share how your prior optimal experiences have informed your conceptualization.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- There are no foreseeable (or expected) risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The potential benefits of participation are the chance to reflect on optimal experience in clinical practice, gain information about the theory of optimal experience (also known as flow), and “relieve” an enjoyable experience.
- The benefits to social work/society are: The data from this study might help clinicians become familiar with the theory of optimal experience (also known as flow) and reflect on optimal experience in their own work.

Confidentiality

- Your participation will be kept confidential. Participant’s names will not be attached to their information. There will be a code number linking social workers’ transcribed narrative responses to their informed consent forms. Transcriptions and recordings will be kept separate from informed consent forms. Any quotations used in the final report or presentation will be disguised to protect the participant’s identity.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by 4/15/2015. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, David Landry at dlandry@smith.edu or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXX. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

If

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

.....

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

.....

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be [audio or video] taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____