Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage. [http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback](http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback)

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the [Library Thesis Consent Form](http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz) and [Deposit Licence](http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz).

Note : Masters Theses

The digital copy of a masters thesis is as submitted for examination and contains no corrections. The print copy, usually available in the University Library, may contain corrections made by hand, which have been requested by the supervisor.
Mindfulness, Stress and Self: An Ontological Shift

Debra Jayne Fraser

This thesis is for examination purposes only and may not be consulted or referred to by any persons other than the examiner.

Abstract

In this study a six week mindfulness programme is delivered to twenty nine health care professionals. Research questions address: what participants’ discourse can tell us about their experiences of stress over the course of the programme, what the changes in discourse suggest that is theoretically useful to the study of mindfulness, and what an exploration of ontological underpinnings can provide to develop our understanding? And finally, whether this exploration supports a useful theory on both mindfulness and stress?

Daily diary, interview and email data is gathered on participants’ discourses on stress and mindfulness. A Social Constructionist epistemology and Grounded Theory methods are used to analyse the data. Most research and commentary on mindfulness is positivist and quantitative relating to health outcomes and psychological processes. This leaves a gap in the literature that this qualitative study addresses.

A main theme in participants’ discourse on stress relates to feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Participants talk of the causes of and solutions to stress and of themselves and others as ‘bad and wrong’. This discourse reflects a ‘rational self’ view through the use of mechanistic, rationalistic and individualistic terms to convey experience. This ‘rational self’ view is grounded in a Cartesian ontology or worldview. In the discourse on stress, participants’ appear to view themselves ideally as rational, autonomous, non-emotional and in control.

A core social process is that with mindfulness training participants’ discourse on stress changes from a disempowered to an empowered view of self. In mindfulness training participants are asked to adopt an alternative to the Cartesian conceptualisation of self. They are asked to practice I am not my thoughts and acceptance of all aspects of experience in the present moment. After mindfulness training, participants’ discourse is of more calmness, peace, insight, awareness, creativity and a sense of expanded time and space. These discourses reflect an empowered view of self and a sense of agency. The discourses are
compared to those before mindfulness training, and to those of the non-finishers and the stress literatures.

An alternative ontological view of the nature of ‘being’ or ‘reality’ and its resultant discourse has implications for stress research and mindfulness research and practice. The conceptualisation of ‘being’ evident in the Buddhist origins of mindfulness (concepts of ‘no self’ and experience as essentially ‘empty’) is not generally explored in the mainstream literature.

Literatures on stress, mindfulness and self provide a framework from which to explore participants’ discourses. It appears that mindfulness programmes in the West have been uplifted and separated from their Eastern origins and rearticulated within a Cartesian ontology. It is important to address questions on mindfulness and stress ontologically to provide a broader range of options for future study, treatment approaches and practice.
Acknowledgements

I thank with great gratitude my family Taryn Hart and Wayne Hewlett who provided wisdom, love, care and compassion throughout this PhD process. I appreciate beyond words the sacrifices they have made so that I could do this work and follow a dream (even through its nightmare phases!).

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr Helen Warren and Dr David Thomas. Dr James Carmody at the University of Massachusetts was my first mindfulness teacher and I thank him for his wise guidance and kindness. I wish to thank Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn who first inspired me to mindfulness and for his kind words of support. I wish to thank Dr Ottilie Stolte, Dr Kieren Faull, Dr Peter Adams, as well as the Waikato Clinical School staff who provided a great deal of help and support in the finishing. I would like to thank the staff at the Centre for Professional Development for their help in developing the website questionnaire as well as others on staff at the University of Auckland.

I wish to acknowledge and thank Tara Brascamp for superb personal and professional supervision over the last years. I would like to thank my friends Tiny Willis, Vanessa Smith (and Mal for his fabulous cooking), Dale Atkinson, Lyn Burgess, Stephen Parkinson, John and Judith Burnett, Pauline Marshall, Vi Woolf, Leny Leong, Mu Leadley, Jane Currie, Andre McLauglin and Anna Thomas for their friendship, care and support. I especially wish to thank Debra Pugh for her expertise in the final draft. I wish to thank Gail Faull and Hallina Bradfield. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Hansen, Fraser, Hewlett and Jamieson clans for their love and support. I wish to thank Phil Taylor for his fabulous personal and legal skills. And finally, I thank with immense gratitude Professor Gregor Coster and Associate Professor Mary Finlayson for listening and for standing up for me and this project at the vital end stage.

Thanks to the unnamed friends and helpers and most especially Chardy, Jessie, Hazel and Ollie. I would like to thank all those colleagues and peers, and people at conferences, who provided expert critique of this study. I wish to thank my clients for their willingness to work with me mindfully. I wish to thank the participants of the study. They contributed a great
deal personally to this work and it was not possible without their enthusiasm and honesty. Finally, I wish to thank Brie for being the greatest teacher.
“Two years ago an old man was stopped on a road near Lhasa with a golden statue. He had sold everything he owned to buy the statue, so he could leave it at a holy mountain to gain merit for the soul of his dead wife. He was certain she had died because he had cut down the prayer flags that always flew over their house to use the rope to tether their last two sheep. He was arrested because he told someone he had killed his wife. Someone else reported that he had given a man money for the death of his wife. It was the money given to the goldsmith but no one bothered to explain. He was accused of having stolen the statue and did not deny it because the house he had sold to buy it had belonged to his wife.”

“What happened?”

“He was sent to prison and died in three months…The government had all its facts right. He did say he killed his wife. He did pay money because of the death. He did feel like a thief with the statue…People here live by truths, not by facts.”

(Eliot Pattison, Beautiful Ghosts, 2004, p.117)
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents ................................................................................... vii

List of Figures ......................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1 Introduction .............................................................................. 1
  The Thesis ............................................................................................. 2
  Research Questions ............................................................................... 3
  Significance of the Study ...................................................................... 3
  Theoretical Framework .......................................................................... 5
  Structure of the Thesis .......................................................................... 7
  Ethical Considerations ........................................................................... 10
  Definition of Terms ............................................................................... 11

Chapter 2 Literature Review .................................................................... 14
  Part 1 - Stress ..................................................................................... 15
    Theory and Models of Stress I ............................................................... 16
    Theory and Models of Stress II .............................................................. 40
  Part 2 – Mindfulness ........................................................................... 51
    Buddhist Psychology and Self-Help Literature .................................. 52
    Research and Literature on Mindfulness ........................................... 56
  Part 3 - Self ......................................................................................... 79
    Conceptualising Self .......................................................................... 80
    Current Conceptualisations of Self ................................................... 97
    Critique of the ‘Rational Self’ ............................................................. 100
    Chapter Summary ............................................................................... 106

Chapter 3 Research Rationale ............................................................... 108

Chapter 4 Method .................................................................................. 112
  Qualitative Research ............................................................................ 112
  Reflexivity ............................................................................................ 113
List of Figures

Figure 1. The Discourse of Work Stress .................................................30
Figure 2. Mindfulness, Stress and Self: An Ontological Shift ..................139