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# Joining the Circle: Exploring the Biopsychosocial, and Spiritual Effects of Hoop Dance

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Joining the Circle: Exploring the Biopsychosocial, and Spiritual  
Effects of Hoop Dance

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

An increasing number of people around the world are joining a blossoming community of hoop dancers and reporting positive holistic benefits and sharing stories of transformation and healing attributed to their hooping practice. The hoop is being reported to provide relief and support for people with depression, anxiety, addiction, and PTSD by igniting their bodies and providing a soothing rhythm and a pathway to dance, movement, self-expression, social connections, personal insight, and meditational benefits. This qualitative study explores the biopsychosocial and spiritual effects of hooping reported during seven non-scheduled standardized interviews with professional hoopers. Stories of change and healing are consistently reported and thematic contextualizing and categorizing data analysis revealed significant effects of hooping on participants' physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing. Significant improvements in participants' mental health are described, including decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and increased feelings of happiness, meaning and purpose. Participants report achieving self-acceptance, and the repair of the mind-body-spirit connection. The hoop is reported to reduce personal competitive tendencies, and bring people together to create open and accepting communities. The data reveals insight into the therapeutic elements of hooping that are helping people achieve embodiment, transcendence, integration, and healing. The implications of these findings are far reaching and contain deep wells for clinical and community social work practices to draw upon for insight into the nature of emotion, bringing people together for a common good, and the development of affordable, enjoyable, resiliency and holistically-based alternatives to deficits-based models of mental health care.

*Keywords:* biopsychosocial spiritual effects of hoop dance, hooping, holistic health, alternative healing, community building, mental health, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, resiliency, positive psychology, dance and movement therapy, mindfulness and meditation, embodiment, acceptance, integration.

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*We come spinning out of nothingness,  
scattering stars,  
the stars form a circle  
and in the center, we dance.*

*– Rumi*

A growing number of people around the world are joining a revolution, beginning with a circle then rippling outward. This circle has been gaining momentum worldwide for the health and fitness benefits it can offer to people who are willing to step into a plastic ring of tubing and give it a whirl. Commonly known as hula-hoops®, these circles have been part of the growing phenomenon of hoop dance, or simply hooping, thanks in part to the fun and relative ease of mastering the basic elements of waist hooping with larger, weightier hoops than the ones introduced and marketed to children in the 1950's by Wham-O. Hooping has been studied for its health benefits and positive fitness results and has earned approval by the American Council on Exercise (ACE) as an excellent cardiovascular workout (Holthusen, Pocari, Doberstein, & Anders, 2011). On average, hooping can burn four hundred and twenty calories per hour. Hoop classes, workshops and groups are popping up at ever growing rates internationally and hoopers are connecting and sharing techniques via the web to spread their love for the hoop.

Notably, in its 2011 report, the ACE also describes the potential benefits of the rhythmic nature and meditative effects of hooping (Holthusen, et al., 2011). While more is being reported on the fitness and physical health benefits of hooping, this meditative effect, along with potential mental health benefits of hooping, has yet to be explored in the scientific literature. Fitness may be one reason for people to begin, but hooping often becomes so much more than simply exercise. The hoop is being used to promote community connections, self-expression, healing, and profound transformation in people's lives.

Though there is currently a lack of published research on the mental health benefits of hooping itself, several other areas of related therapeutic applications can be explored to help us gain an understanding of the appeal and potential of hoops for personal growth and transformation. For example, a growing understanding of the neurological effects of meditation has supported the use of mindfulness-based practice in therapy and treatment of a number of mental health diagnoses, including anxiety, depression, addiction, and PTSD (Finger & Arnold, 2008; Garland, Schwarz, Kelly, Whitt, & Howard, 2012; Godfrin & Heeringen, 2010; Mayo, 2010; Wisner & Hawkins, 2013). Another form of treatment for these issues and others that has documented success is Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), which also fosters the mind-body connection and self-expression through movement (Akandere & Demir, 2011; Chambliss, 1982; Homann, 2010; Jeong, Hong, Lee, & Park, 2005). While no research has been reported on the use of hoops in DMT, much of the information and understanding of how DMT uses the mind-body connection to help people has the potential to lend insight into the benefits of hooping and hoop dance.

As a social work student I am intrigued by the striking similarities between the many of the goals of social work and the accomplishments of the hoop. Combining the ideas of mindfulness, meditation, dance, movement, creative expression, and the powerful symbol of the circle itself, hoops appear to have the potential to offer a great deal to those who are able to use them. I would like to gain a greater understanding of these elements of hooping and the potential effects of hooping on mental health. The purpose of this study is to explore the biological, psychological, social and spiritual effects and to inform an understanding of the therapeutic benefits of hooping.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Hooping Movement**

In the past decade hooping has grown in popularity as a form of exercise, self-expression, and a pathway to social connection. Hooping provides cardiovascular benefits, builds core strength, and increases coordination and flexibility in a fun and engaging way (Bryant, 2012; Holthusen, et al., 2011). Hooping or hoop dance can be done alone or in groups and is often done to music. Hoop groups have been forming and growing in cities around the world, enabling hoopers to come together for weekly hoop jams to share their passion and hooping joy. Hoop enthusiasts can also connect, share skills, videos, tutorials and projects in online forums. Most people begin with hooping at the waist, but many expand their skills and abilities to use all parts of the body in their hooping, often incorporating dance and yoga practices into their routines. For many hoopers what begins as a novelty quickly expands into a full-blown passion for hooping, with many people finding new careers through selling hoops, performing, and teaching hooping classes, workshops, and retreats.



The roots of the modern hooping movement can be traced to a handful of people and a band called the *String Cheese Incident* who tossed hoops into their audiences at concerts and music festivals. Starting in the late 1990's, a small number of hoopers began to spread the hoop love in their own unique and individualized ways. The number of hoopers has grown exponentially over the past fifteen years and these hoopers have created ways for the global hoop community to connect, share their hooping, art, and stories. A growing number of websites and blogs are devoted to hooping, helping people connect, share, and learn. The longest running hoop blog, [hooping.org](http://hooping.org) has been in existence for eleven years, has contributing writers from all over the globe, countless hoopers sharing photos, videos, and tutorials, and has received over eleven million hits (Hagen, 2014). In addition to the global contributions there are hoopers who are dedicated to organizing and promoting their local hoop communities, arranging gatherings, hoop jams, and hosting traveling hoop teachers.

Hooping has developed its own cultures and the diversity of the people joining the community is reflected in the countless ways that people are moving and connecting with their hoops. Hoops are being interacted with in evolving ways and hoopers are continuously introducing new elements to hooping. Hoopers develop and share new movements and sequences and there is a constant unfolding of creative interpretation and expression connecting people through their movement with the hoop. Hooping can be more skill oriented, or it can be exploratory, dance, or flow focused. Hoop dance can involve on and off body hooping, isolations, or movements that create illusions of stillness, tosses, wedgies, vortexes, and an ever-expanding vocabulary of innovations with the hoop.

**Healing and personal transformation.**

The physical benefits of hooping have been studied and documented to an extent (Holthusen, et al., 2011) however there have yet to be any reported studies on the mental and spiritual benefits that many claim to be the result of habitual hooping. Informal reports on the psychological and spiritual impact of hooping have been increasing steadily in blogs and news articles and there are a number of professionals claiming that hoops can enable powerful transformation and healing for people dealing with a wide range of issues including cancer, addiction, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Baxter, 2012; Darling, 2010; Hagen, 2012c; Hagen, 2013b; Palmer, 2013).

Philo Hagen is a prominent figure in the hooping community who has shared his hoop journey through creative videos and hooping.org the blog he co-founded that now shares thousands of hoop stories, photos, and videos from around the world. Hagen (2010) explains that besides the amazing physical benefits of hooping, *“somewhere along the way we discovered our hoops were great for our emotional health, helping many adults learn to play again. We’ve found them to be valuable as a meditation tool, bringing us back into the center of our selves and our lives.”*

Hagen is one of a growing number who have found transformation and healing through the hoop. It has been reported that a nurse in Ashland, Oregon has used hoops to aid in her recovery from PTSD and has begun using hoops in her work with children who have experienced trauma (Darling, 2010). In an online article, Denise Kesti Ewing explains that hooping helped her reconnect with her body and in doing so face traumatic memories which she had previously been coping with through defensive dissociation.

Ewing claimed that the hoop was an essential tool in her recovery from PTSD, providing a safe place for her to reconnect with her body and her past and begin to heal (Darling, 2010).

A recent story in the *New York Daily News* centered on Cecilia Carty, a fifty year old Harlem, NY resident who is battling brain and rectal cancer and has lost her eyesight due to her chemotherapy treatments. Carty uses hoops to stay active, hooping through her neighborhood with a friend, and says that hooping has helped her relax despite dealing with a great deal of stress (Weichselbaum, 2013). Hooping has also been used to help facilitate rehabilitation for Lauren Resnick who had lost her ability to walk at age nine due to a painful and debilitating condition called Reflex Neurovascular Dystrophy (RND). Resnick was introduced to hooping during her intensive, forty-two day hospital treatment for RND. As her recovery progressed, Resnick's passion for hooping grew and she is now making public appearances, performing with up to twelve hoops at a time (Hagen, 2013a).

In an interview for [hooping.org](http://hooping.org), Catina Jane Gray describes how hooping has not only helped her lose seventy pounds, but has aided in her ability to manage an anxiety disorder that was impacting her life. Catina believes the hoop has helped her gain confidence in her ability to overcome challenges and that it can empower people through movement (Hagen, 2013b). This sentiment appears to be illustrated by the growing number of people who post their hooping videos online each day. Inside the hoop, self-consciousness seems to be suspended and creative expression flows more freely (Kekaulike, 2012). Kara Maia Spencer reported similar experiences in an interview,

saying, “*hooping has helped me to express my creativity...and feel empowered in being my own unique individual*” (Hagen, 2008).

### **Hooping as meditation.**

The art of hooping is meditative and centering for a growing number who refer to hooping as a practice, bringing balance and harmony to busy lives (Hagen, 2012c; Baxter, 2012; Eastburn, 2011). Jonathan Baxter discovered hooping through an effort to recover from a shoulder injury, but found that his daily hoop practice was leading to much deeper meditation and emotional healing. Baxter founded the Hoop Path and through workshops and classes, he teaches techniques to combine movement and introspection in a meditative hooping practice.

Kara Maia Spencer describes her experience with hooping as “*very meditative, centering, and moving,*” in an interview with hooping.org’s Philo Hagen (2008). She goes on to say “*Hooping is also transformative...the vortex allows me to transmute my emotions of worry, fear, or depression into calm, peace, gratitude, and love.*” These sentiments are echoed throughout blog posts and hooping websites promoting hoop classes or simply sharing individual hoop journeys as they are often called.

### **Self-expression and self-discovery.**

Connecting to one’s body through the hoop can be a deeply introspective and grounding practice for many hoop dancers (Hagen, 2008; Hagen, 2012e; MacDougall, 2011). Through hooping, new states of calm and self-acceptance are discovered and anxiety and fears overcome (Hagen, 2008; Hagen, 2013b). Hoop performer, crafter, and teacher Luna Breeze describes her self-discovery through the hoop in an interview Philo Hagen,

*Like many teenagers, I grew up in my adolescence feeling kind of small. I wasn't sure who I was or what inspired me. As a result, somewhere along the way I decided that I didn't really have much to offer the world. I quickly became a passive observer rather than a participant. I had a hard time connecting with people and they had a hard time connecting with me too. The hoop bashed this concept in one fell swoop. Through the circle I learned just how much I had to offer. I learned that I was passionate, beautiful, and opinionated... I became inspired and I loved participating in this magical world. The hoop taught me to reach out to people and the world around me, and the second I did, the world started pouring its heart back to me with endless possibilities (Hagen, 2012e).*

Beth Lavinder explains her journey to self-discovery through the hoop as she found her hidden strengths, vulnerabilities, and “*a voice I didn't know I had,*” (Hagen, 2012f). In the same blog post she describes the “*unique power of the hoop to both take us inwards to our most essential self, and expand us outwards and fill us with authentic feeling, like a balloon being filled with helium, ready to rise in the air.*” Like other hoopers who share her passion, Beth has been hooping for many years and now teaches hooping to others (Hagen, 2012f).

### **Community.**

The hoop community can be broadly defined as consisting of anyone who shares the love of hooping. It is part of a greater flow community, which includes other forms of flow arts such a poi and staff spinning. The hoop community is characterized by openness, acceptance, and respect for each individual's unique contributions. Local hoop

communities that have been created in cities nationwide offer additional benefits of social support and can bring people from diverse backgrounds together to share skills and learn from each other.

Hoop classes, groups and gatherings have become a fun and enjoyable way for people to connect and be involved together in a healthy activity. Some classes focus on exercise, while other classes and informal gatherings promote self-expression, movement, dance and sharing. The transference of skills and the translation and expansion of movements contribute to the connections people share when they are connecting through the hoop. Informal meet up groups are sprouting up on college campuses and in cities around the world. Weekly hoop jams allow hoopers to get together, share music, skills, movement, dancing, and fun while spreading their passion for the hoop. In an interview with hooping.org editor Bonnie MacDougall, Cally Chavez explains, “hooping has enriched my life and made it possible to connect to people on such a large scale” (MacDougall, 2011).

### **Spiritual dimensions and flow.**

Many hoopers describe a spiritual connection to their hoop practice. Hoop enthusiast Chrisha Favors explains, “*Hooping transformed me into a believer of spiritual and emotional well-being. The hoop is my lovely companion, a wonderful dance partner and a portal to increased happiness*” (Colindres, 2013). Luna Breeze adds, “*the hoop really is a sacred teacher. Its power is AWESOME and you don’t have to be spiritual to see it!*” (Hagen, 2012e). Hooping is being used as an instrument of praise and a vehicle of hope (Hagen, 2013b) and there are people who gather regularly in Austin, Texas for

Hoop Church to share their joy of hooping and create a spiritually connected community (Hagen, 2012b).

Numerous groups have formed, including Sacred Circularities, a movement meditation group that holds yearly retreats for hoop and yoga practitioners to expand their skills and deepen their connection with their bodies and spirit through movement, yoga and hooping. Hoopers reference sacred geometry and spiritual elements of hooping are frequently captured in the symbol of the circle. The continuous rotation, movement and rhythm of the hoop can be seen and felt as a reflection of universal forces and life's unending circle (Eastburn, 2011; Hagen, 2012g). *"The hoop creates a sacred circle encompassing the body. In spiritual traditions worldwide, people have created sacred circles for rituals, prayers, meditation, protection, healing, and trance. The circle represents wholeness, birth, life, and transformation"* (Stallings, 2005).

Hoop dancers consistently reference the significance of flow states in their hoop practice.

*When I find my flow during practice, a strange thing happens: I feel at once obliterated and infinite. I am an electron and a nucleus; I am a moon and a planet; I am twin galaxies circling a shared point, and I am the point. It is as though by feeling like all of these things, I feel like none of them... and in that liminal state, spiritual insight occurs* (Nieweem, 2011).

Flow is known for its ability to foster a sense of wellbeing and is linked to creative activities (Chilton, 2013). The hoop seems particularly suited to enable flow as it is a fluid, continuous activity wherein skills can be mastered and built upon, leading to increased self-efficacy and states of calm openness. For many avid hoopers it seems that

the awareness of the connection between the mind, body and spirit is fostered through moving with the hoop. This increased mind-body-spirit connection and the entrance into flow states seem to be significant elements of hooping practices, coming up repeatedly in people's informal stories. These elements will serve to inform and guide this research.

### **Mind-Body-Spirit Practices in Therapy**

To begin to understand the potential holistic benefits and social work applications of hooping, I will examine multiple existing therapeutic modalities that incorporate various means of exploring and restoring the mind-body-spirit connection. The significance of this connection has historically been overlooked by both western medicine and psychology, however momentum has been growing towards a greater understanding of the importance of working with mind and body together to address both physical and mental health concerns especially in the social work field which has a history of including more holistic perspectives to address peoples' needs (Finger & Arnold, 2008). A growing movement in clinical social work is shifting practice towards a more integrated understanding of the interconnected nature of mind, body and spirit (Leung, Chan, Ng, & Lee, 2009).

Techniques that involve mind-body work are often utilized in empowerment and well-being treatment models (Freeman, Wolfson, & Affolter, 1998). Rather than focusing on symptoms and pathologies, mind-body therapies work to restore connections between mind, body and spirit, a practice that can align well with some of the core values of social work. Mind-body work lends itself to the ecological perspective, allowing for a more holistic conceptualization of clients and acknowledging the dynamic nature of the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains (Leung, et al., 2009).



Mind-body work can involve a wide range of traditional Eastern and newer Western practices including but not limited to yoga, meditation, mindfulness practices, biofeedback, exercise therapy, Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), and energy work. Models such as the Integrative Body-Mind-Spirit model (I-BMS) focus on the primary goals of promoting balance, fostering strengths, and facilitating meaning making and peace of mind (Leung, et al., 2009). Within such models, a range of components can be tailored to client needs. The wide variety of mind-body modalities allows social workers and other professionals to tend to the unique needs and worldviews of clients and develop personalized treatments and interventions while honoring clients' individuality (Finger & Mayfield, 2008; Leung, et al., 2009).

Therapeutic use of mind-body work can be done with individuals and groups and can be used to facilitate increased self-awareness, openness, vitality and energy (Freeman, et al., 1998). Techniques have been applied in group work with proven success in helping group members increase social connections and feelings of mutuality and belonging (Freeman, et. al, 1998; Finger & Mayfield, 2008). Mind-body work can be used in addressing both physical and mental health issues, helping to close the gap between the medical model, psychoanalytic framework, and holistic models of human functioning and health (Finger & Mayfield, 2009).

### **Mindfulness and meditation.**

The repeated characterization of hooping as meditation leads this researcher to explore other forms of meditation and mindfulness practices, which have already been incorporated into therapeutic applications. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005), one of the fields leading mind-body medicine physicians, has defined mindfulness as “*openhearted,*

*moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness*” (p. 24). This awareness can be cultivated through a variety of mediation practices where attention is repeatedly returned to a single object of mediation, frequently, the breath. Mindfulness practices help cultivate mental control and steady attention and is seen as a powerful tool to reshape the brain and mind (Hanson, 2009).

A Buddhist tradition, the roots of mindfulness practice are ancient and have served meditation masters and novices alike for centuries, helping to cultivate mental states of calm, acceptance, non-reactivity and a nonjudgmental perception of the world and people in it. By bringing attention to the body, meditation practices can foster a connection to one’s own felt sense of self and repair the mind-body connection. While meditation practices have existed long before modern psychology, the integration of such practices and skills into western medicine and psychology is a far more recent movement with a growing body of evidence-based research behind it (Wisner & Hawkins, 2013).

Mindfulness-based therapeutic approaches have been proven to effectively reduce stress, interrupt depression, decrease addictive behaviors, and reduce reactivity to external influences (Godfrin & Heeringen, 2010; Garland, Schwarz, Kelly, Whitt, & Howard, 2011). Mindfulness practices have been combined with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to aid in the treatment of a number of physical and mental illnesses and improve overall functioning for people dealing with multiple stressors. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy can be used to help clients learn to disengage from negative thought patterns and increase awareness and focus on the present moment.

The awareness that is cultivated through mindfulness practices can help clients navigate moods and tune in to thoughts, feelings and body states that may be problematic

(Godfrin & Heeringen, 2010). This awareness can help clients identify thoughts that may trigger addictive behavior for people recovering from substance abuse, and tune in to early warning signs and symptomatic thought patterns that may signal a relapse of depression for clients with major depressive disorder (Godfrin & Heeringen, 2010; Garland, et al., 2011).

Traditional mindfulness practices such as seated meditation were developed in times with cultural climates that were very different from those we live in now, especially in western societies. The levels of stimulation that our brains are required to respond to in our current culture have vastly expanded since these practices were first developed. Rick Hanson (2009), a neuropsychologist and meditation teacher points to the fact that traditional meditation methods are not always suited to everyone who tries them. Citing the importance of understanding neurological diversity, Hanson explains that many people give up on meditation when it does not suit their individual neurological needs. There is a need to expand the contemplative traditions to suit the needs of a neurologically diverse population (Hanson, 2009). With the growing use of hooping for meditative purposes, this aspect of hoop dance may serve to meet this need in a unique way.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy**

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is an established therapeutic practice field that may lend further insight into the potential applications of hooping and hoop dance in therapeutic practices. DMT practices are designed with focus on the interconnected nature of mind, body and spirit (ADTA). The American Dance Therapy Association defines DMT as the “*psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional,*

*cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual.*” Body movement provides the means of assessing and designing interventions in DMT with attention given to movement behavior as means of communicating and expressing inner states (ADTA). DMT explores the connection between motion and emotion that is believed to support development (Leahy, 2004). DMT utilizes the body to engage the brain, impacting physical and psychological outcomes (Homann, 2010). DMT can be done with all age groups and has been shown to be an effective application in work with groups, families, and individuals, including people with depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and other severe and persistent mental illnesses (Akandere & Demir, 2009; Barton, 2011; Chambliss, 1980; Jeong & Hong, 2005).

DMT is rooted in creative expression, empathy, and exploring and understanding non-verbal behavior and emotions. Through activities such as connecting or attuning movement to rhythms, clients are able to gain a felt sense of the continuity of self, or experience themselves existing from moment to moment (Gorham, 1995). DMT can be used to help create and explore personal boundaries, reduce stress, and build trust and resilience (Gorham, 1995; Blank, 2009; Travaglia & Treefoot, 2010). DMT, like other creative arts therapies can create a safe environment and psychological space for clients to explore negative experiences or cognitions and channel those things into a positive and creative outlet rather than a destructive behavior that may harm them (Davis, 2009; Scott & Ross, 2006).

### **Movement and mindfulness.**

Movement can be used to facilitate mindfulness through developing cooperation between the body and mind. The awareness that emerges through focusing on the body

can be harnessed to influence and develop more adaptive behaviors and interactions with people and the environment (Leahy, 2004). This awareness that is cultivated through movement can allow clients to replace automatic emotional responses to stressors with mindfully considered reactions (Barton, 2011). The increased awareness that is developed can help clients feel a greater sense of safety and connection in the present and facilitate the establishment of healthy internal boundaries, enabling safer interactions within their environment (Leahy, 2004).

The results of building increased body awareness have been linked to findings on the effects of meditation on the brain (Homann, 2010). DMT methods can facilitate regulation of participants responses to stimuli through bringing attention to bodily and sensory awareness, helping to ground participants in a relaxed and safe space within their bodies and increasing their capacity to self-regulate (Homann, 2010). Establishing a sense of safety and connection is an essential element in most healing practices and therapy. People with Schizophrenia, for example require a sense of security before they can begin to rebuild connections between their bodies, minds, and eventually their environments (Leahy, 2004). Dance and other body-based interventions have been shown to improve mood and anxiety symptoms for people in psychiatric treatment (Barton, 2011).

### **Neurobiological support for DMT.**

DMT is at the forefront of understanding the mind-body connection in psychotherapeutic practices. By utilizing somatic, emotional and perceptual processes in conjunction, DMT enables greater potential therapeutic insight into a person's entire experience, thoughts, and feelings. Our bodies and brains are constantly involved

together in a dynamic exchange and analysis of information, organizing and interpreting new information, and relating new input to past experiences to inform our response (Homann, 2010). There has been an increase in our level of understanding of how different parts of the brain interact with the systems of the body and how experiences are interpreted. It is now understood that trauma, for example, is often processed differently than ordinary experiences and can be processed and stored without being understood or conceptualized verbally (Chambliss, 1980; Homann, 2010; van der Kolk, 2002).

Trauma and other stressors such as ruptures in infant attachment can disrupt brain organization and autonomic nervous system functioning, leading to imbalances that can result in persistent anxiety, hyperarousal, emotional dysregulation, and an inability to feel safe and secure (Homann, 2010). Traumatic events that carry intense emotional charges can be stored in the implicit memory system, meaning the body can store an imprint of events subconsciously. This storage process can be a felt sense within the body, underlying all subsequent experiences and creating a distorted framework within which new experiences are interpreted (Homann, 2010).

Symptoms related to trauma and early attachment disruptions are both physiological and psychological and effective treatment needs to address both aspects (Homann, 2010). DMT utilizes and supports body awareness to promote balance in the organization of perception and regulation as well as the arousal response (Homann, 2010). DMT is believed to facilitate communication between key brain areas, which connect motor function, sensory perceptions, emotional interpretation, and verbal processing by activating the connections between the limbic system, hippocampus, amygdala and the thalamus. The increased interaction between the verbal and non-verbal

brain centers that DMT facilitates can enable a greater understanding and ability to process felt emotions, and can help clients verbalize feelings that had previously existed only subconsciously or in preverbal, felt senses (Chambliss, 1982; Homann, 2010; Kock & Bräuninger, 2005).

DMT has been shown to activate reparative mind-body states, and can encourage the translation of memories from implicit to explicit memory systems. Using movement and the body as means to access the underlying felt memories that influence perception on a subconscious level, DMT can help individuals gain access to the hippocampus, where body-based, emotionally activating information is stored (Chambliss, 1982, Homann, 2010). The information stored in the preverbal right brain can be accessed through creative means such as movement. A greater connection between the verbal processing centers of the left brain and the feeling, sensing and interpreting processes of the right brain can be achieved through movement, helping clients gain an understanding of the underlying interpretations and felt senses influencing their perception of themselves and the world around them. In this way, the body can become a tool for self-understanding, increased self-regulation and ultimately, healing (Homann, 2010).

### **Flow, movement, and positive psychology.**

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi first introduced the concept of flow to the field of psychology while studying artists in the 1960's. Csíkszentmihályi characterizes flow as the mental state resulting from complete absorption of mind and body in a given activity, the absence of self-consciousness, an altered experience of time, and the sense that the activity one is engaged in is intrinsically rewarding (Chilton, 2013). Flow has been

empirically connected with creativity and wellbeing, and can be accessed through DMT and other creative arts therapies (Chilton, 2013).

Flow has been described as the complete immersion of self in an activity, wherein emotions are harnessed to carry out the creative or learning process. During flow experiences, one is both relaxed and engaged and energized, in a state of open receptiveness, which optimizes learning. New information can enter more easily and be integrated whereas states characterized by stress or fear can limit the intake of new information since cortical functioning is inhibited by increased adrenaline and cortisol. These neurochemicals can restrict blood flow to the brain's frontal lobes and limit cognitive processing of new information (Homann, 2010).

Activities that enable flow provide clear goals and immediate feedback and offer a challenge that is manageable and facilitates growth or expansion of skills at the same time (Moran & Nemec, 2013). Flow has been proven to be therapeutic, providing optimal experiences, growth, self-confidence and joyful states, frequently achieved through activities that utilize creative and artistic expression (Chilton, 2013).

The positive effects of flow can be cumulative and can increase a person's inner resources and their capacity to fully engage in and enjoy life (Chilton, 2013). The characterization of flow as effortless attention relates to elements of mindfulness and meditation and has similar outcomes. There is also a link between flow and the neurobiological elements discussed earlier, especially systems of implicit and explicit memory. When engaged in a flow state, the ability to access and process implicit memory is increased enabling information stored by implicit memory to be better understood explicitly and therefore verbalized (Chilton, 2013; Homann, 2010). This



concept reinforces the use of DMT as a creative and body-based therapeutic means of accessing emotions and internal processes, which shape a person's views and reactions to stimuli.

Psychologists Martin Seligman and Csíkszentmihályi Mihály who developed what is known as positive psychology identify flow as a key element in the creation of positive mental states and wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's theories have undergone transformations over time and the current emphasis in positive psychology is on the significance of making choices for their own sake. Hooping is one such activity that is often chosen by people for its intrinsic rewards, essentially, for its own sake, as well as its ability to enable states of flow (Hagen, 2012, May 31).

### **Exercise Therapy**

With the known physical benefits of exercising with a hoop (Holthusen, et al., 2011) it is important to consider the application of exercise therapy, which has been used in treatment to help prevent mental illness, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and aid in smoking cessation (Wolff, Gaudlitz, von Lindenberger, Plag, Heinz & Ströhle, 2011). Evidence strongly supports the prescriptive use of exercise and physical activity in the treatment of major depressive disorder in addition to other therapies or as the sole treatment (Rethorst & Trivedi, 2013; Wolff et al., 2011).

Typically prescribed exercises include walking, jogging outdoors or the use of a treadmill for aerobic benefits, and training with weights, ideally in combination. Exercise therapy meets growing the need for more cost-effective treatment options and can help clients who lack access to more costly therapies (Rethorst & Trivedi, 2013). Given the fun nature of hooping and the enjoyment that people report, it is worth exploring the

motivation to hoop as compared with other exercises that are prescribed in a therapeutic capacity.

### **EMDR**

A final area of exploration to consider in this study is the potential implications of the growing application of the evidence-based therapy technique known as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) which uses bilateral stimulation through repeated side to side eye movements, alternating left-right auditory stimulation, or tactile stimulation such as alternately tapping the left and right hand, while a client simultaneously describes a memory or thought (Nieuwenhuis, Elzinga, Ras, Berends, Duijs, Samara, & Slagter, 2012). This is relevant to explore here since some hoopers have cited this bilateral stimulation as an important element of hooping, as hooping is believed to activate both the left and right brain hemispheres through the rhythmic engagement of both sides of the body (Hagen, 2007).

EMDR has been widely used to treat PTSD since it was first developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro to reduce the intensity of the distress brought on by traumatic memories. Though clinical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of EMDR in treating PTSD, and trauma-related anxiety, there is still a limited understanding of the actual mechanisms at work and much debate in the fields of neuroscience and psychology over how EMDR works and what purpose eye-movements and bilateral stimulation serve (Lee & Cuijpers, 2012). Recent studies of EMDR using advanced neuroimaging techniques reveal post EMDR treatment brain changes which suggest a shift in processing from the emotionally focused limbic system, to the cortical regions of the

brain where cognitive and associative processing takes place (Pagani, Lorenzo, Veraro, Nicolais, Monaco, Lauretti, Russo, Niolu, Amanti, Fernandez, & Siracusano, 2012).

Additional studies have revealed that people suffering from PTSD display lower functioning of the thalamus and increased activation of the right brain hemisphere. Reduced thalamic activity is associated with the failure to integrate memories cognitively, leading to distorted interpretations of traumatic events such as self-blame, and somatosensory integration, causing fragmentation of bodily associated memories. The dynamic hemispheric integration, or balanced communication between left and right brain processes is also interrupted, leading to the elevated activity in the right hemisphere where emotional activity occurs (Bergman, 2008). The bilateral stimulation of EMDR may help to facilitate improvements in the functioning of areas of the brain that coordinate hemispheric integration (Bergman, 2008).

There are alternative explanations for the mechanisms at work in EMDR. One such alternative posits that the effects of taxing working memory by having clients focus on a task while simultaneously recalling their traumatic memories bears more relevance on the outcomes of EMDR than bilateral stimulation (van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012). Given the range of hypotheses of how EMDR actually works, and doubts around the benefits of bilateral stimulation, this topic will not be a primary area of this research on hooping. It will merely inform the exploration and research as EMDR can be seen as a unique treatment that utilizes the body to impact the brain and mind.

There is a growing number of hoop dancers who claim that hooping has benefitted their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. A number of mind-body and spiritually based therapeutic techniques have also been gaining momentum in the field of

social work, lending to our understanding of the importance of the mind-body-spirit connection and its impact on psychological health and wellbeing. There is a growing need for new, affordable, and accessible therapeutic modalities to help empower people to increase their overall health and overcome stressors and challenges to their mental health. The purpose of this study is to explore the personal experiences of hoop dancers and hoop professionals and the biopsychosocial and spiritual impact of hooping on their lives to begin to understand the benefits and the potential application of hooping in social work practice.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to gain greater understanding of the holistic implications of any intervention or activity used in social work practice, it is helpful to examine the effects on the integrated systems of human functioning, which can be done through the biopsychosocial and spiritual framework. Rooted in systems theory and drawing from the ecological as well as the strengths-based models, the biopsychosocial and spiritual approach helps social workers take into account the multiple layers of complex interactions between a person and their environment (Hutchison, 2011; Friedman & Allen, 2011). This framework is particularly relevant to this research as the aim of this study is to examine the impact of hooping in terms of the biological, psychological, social and spiritual impact, with attention to the dynamic effects on the mind-body-spirit connection and mental health of individuals in particular.

Systems theory allows for a holistic understanding of the complex nature of interactions between individuals and their environment. Assessing clients, families, or larger systems through the systems lens of a biopsychosocial and spiritual evaluation

enables the identification of areas of conflict or maladjustments that may be inhibiting optimal functioning within a system. In this framework, a system is defined as an organized unit or whole, consisting of interacting components. The biopsychosocial framework acknowledges the interdependence of individuals within larger systems such as families, communities, and the greater social environment. The systems framework draws upon a wide range of disciplines to inform practices, which aim to enhance functioning for individuals and create systems that are more conducive to client success (Lesser & Pope, 2011).

This approach also helps social workers identify strengths that can be built on or utilized to help correct imbalances within systems that may be negatively impacting clients. The strengths-based model emphasizes the idea that each individual has strengths, resilience, and the ability to cope with challenges. Part of the role of the social worker in this model is to identify these strengths and support clients in activating their personal and systemic resources in order to solve problems and create change (NASW, 2005). A strengths-based approach does not focus on symptoms or pathology, rather its purpose is to empower and inspire hope and transformation through identifying and optimizing inner and social strengths and resources (Lesser & Pope). With the number of reports of healing and transformation through hooping, it seems possible that hooping is able to help individuals activate inner resources, which is the primary goal of a strengths-based approach.

Since hooping is a kinesthetic activity that is very different from more traditional social work applications, this research will also draw on theoretical influences of dance and movement therapy and the mind-body connection in particular. The central

theoretical principles of DMT include the interaction of body and mind and an understanding that changes in movement can impact overall functioning, an emphasis on the non-verbal elements of relationship and communication, and the understanding of the symbolic nature and underlying influences of movement (Meekum, 2002). In relation to hooping, these theories can lend insight into the importance of movement and the ability of the body to communicate with and influence the mind.

This research is informed by the contributions of positive psychology to our understanding of human happiness and wellbeing. This theory proposes that there are five key elements to human happiness including positive emotion, flow, meaning, relationships, and accomplishment, all of which contribute to wellbeing, are pursued for their own sake, and can be independently defined and measured (Seligman, 2011). Flow, or engagement and merging with an object or activity bears particular relevance to hooping and hoop dance, which is considered a flow art itself. There are also indications that hooping can lead to gains in the other key areas identified by the theory of positive psychology. In many ways, positive psychology is a natural fit with the strengths-based approach of social work as they are both counter to the deficits-based medical model most frequently relied on in western psychological practices. The mental health benefits of hooping will be explored through this combined biopsychosocial/spiritual approach, with emphasis on positive emotion, flow, meaning, relationships, and accomplishment.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study is exploratory in nature and intends to gather information on the biopsychosocial and spiritual elements of hooping, or hoop dance. As this is a

preliminary study and the literature is void of any research on this topic at present, the design of this study was informed by grounded theory, meaning it attempted to gather data to inform a theoretical development rather than first positing a hypothesis and attempting to use data to support it (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). The design was qualitative and investigative, relying on personal interviews to obtain data. The interview was a nonscheduled-standardized format, having a series of consistent questions, but allowing for flexibility and modification to the interview format as needed (Monette, et al., 2011).

Since this area of study has yet to be explored in the literature, a modified phenomenological approach was applied, in which themes and meanings were derived through individual stories of people's personal interpretations and experiences with the hoop (Creswell, 2014). This approach enabled the discovery of information that was not yet hypothesized and helped to illuminate the subjective experience of hoop dancers, and inform an understanding of the biopsychosocial and spiritual effects of hooping.

### **Sample**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit interview participants. Seven interviews were conducted with participants who were selected based on their use of hoops in a professional capacity, as teachers, instructors, group organizers, or their use of hoops in a therapeutic capacity. A selection of professional hoopers was identified on-line and contacted via email (see Appendix A) to explain the purpose of this study and to inquire into their interest and availability to participate. Nineteen hoopers were initially contacted and seven interviews took place with hooping professionals from three countries and five states within the US.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Involvement in this research was completely voluntary and participants were fully informed of their rights and the risk factors as research subjects before the interviews (see Appendix A). Participants were given forms outlining confidentiality and the research process and all participants gave consent for the use of their interviews in this study. Participation in this research posed no identifiable threat of harm to interview subjects and the identities of participants were not reported in the research findings. This research did not target a vulnerable population, as all subjects were self-identified as professionals and all selected participants were over the age of eighteen and able to freely give their consent.

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative data was collected via interviews by the researcher with participants. Interviews were conducted in person or by web cam and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview consisted of fourteen questions regarding the biopsychosocial and spiritual effects of hooping and hoop dance (see Appendix B). Supplementary questions were asked to clarify or inquire further about relevant information that arose during some of the interviews. The interviews followed this nonscheduled-standard format to allow for conversational dialogue and flexibility to explore additional data while also adhering to consistent questions and data gathering (Monette, et al., 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed for content and themes. The analysis of the transcribed data combined contextualizing and categorizing strategies in



order to accurately display context while also attempting to identify broader concepts (Monette, et al., 2011). Data was analyzed for meaning according to the intended research themes of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual elements. Further analysis explored emerging themes that had not been predicted prior to the data collection. These themes were coded and categorized with effort to maintain contextual information (Berg, 2009). Coded data underwent further analysis to identify recurring themes or language, specific benefits of hooping as well as potential drawbacks or negative elements. A final analysis and interpretation of all thematic findings was used to inform theoretical development and to identify potential implications for hooping as a therapeutic application in social work practice.

### **Findings**

The data set for the following analysis and report consisted of ninety pages of transcripts from interviews with six female and one male respondent. All participants earn significant portions of their income through hooping. Participants had a variety of professional involvement with the hoop and they had a range of three to nine years of hooping experience. Five of the seven interviews were conducted via webcam and two interviews were held in person. All interviews were recorded between January 25th and March 16th of 2014. Content analysis of the transcripts yielded an unforeseen amount of information, much of which is interconnected and reflects the holistic nature of the effects of hooping and the design of this study.

The overarching theme quickly emerged as each interview contained a story of healing, personal growth, or change. Every participant describes changes in their physical body. Every hooper reports a calming, leveling, or centering effect. The

majority of participants describe improvements in mood, level of happiness, sense of purpose, and sense of connection. Other prominent themes include the implicit meditative effects of hooping, understanding others and interconnection, sharing, evolving expectations, letting go of the need to compete, and the mind-body-spirit connection.

All identified themes were categorized by content into physical, emotional, social, and spiritual effects. The analysis revealed additional broad categories of personal growth and change, as well as participant observations and interpretations of the therapeutic elements of hooping. One participant illustrates the natural flow and overlapping effects in each of the key areas of this study when she explains how the role of hooping has evolved for her,

*I think at first it was a way for me to take all of these bad habits I had developed in my life and kind of channel them into a better one. And then it was really, really physical for me and I was seeing the effects in my physical body and that was really wonderful. Then it kind of transcended into kind of this mental, emotional thing where it was almost like meditative, where it was taking time out. It was accessing this point where I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing anymore, I was just doing it and it was bringing me this internal bliss that I couldn't really explain. Now it serves more of a community purpose, you know, when I walk around with the hoop it starts so many conversations. And I feel like it brings me connections to all these people that I wouldn't have been connected to otherwise. So it definitely has changed a lot.*

The scope of this project cannot contain the entirety of the insight and understanding that the study participants shared, however I will attempt to capture as many of the key themes, elements, and connections as this project will allow.

### **Physical Impacts and Observations**

#### **Physical benefits.**

All study participants report significant impact on their physical health, especially noticeable when they first began hooping. Benefits include increased overall strength and fitness levels for all seven participants. Several hoopers also report an increased interest and participation in other means of exercise and fitness as a way to improve or support their hooping practices and overall health. These additional activities include dance classes, cardio training, circuit training, jogging, and yoga. All participants report changes in their physical bodies, often beyond what they had expected when they first picked up a hoop. *“I like seeing where bodies grow. And everyone’s body changes so much when they start hooping. I feel like it was an accident, like I am an accidental athlete. Like holy crap look at your abs! Holy crap what happened to my abs?! Those weren’t there!”*

The small repetitive movements, also referred to as micro-movements, are described by hoopers as particularly beneficial, tightening and strengthening muscle groups that are frequently under utilized. *“It’s so good for us. It builds up all the smaller muscles. It supports all these big muscles that are supposed to be so strong. We build up all these big muscles, but we don’t have full muscle development because we do all these static movements.”* One participant reports significant improvement in symptoms of a congenital spinal disorder and three hoopers report that they know someone who has used

hooping to rehab after an injury, achieving positive results. One hooper also notes the “unsung hero” of improved digestive health as a key element to the overall health benefits of hooping.

***Activating and opening the body.***

Participants describe hooping as an exciting way to activate the body, especially for people who are not prone to being very active normally. According to participants, hooping facilitates movement in a way that is fun and accessible and there are tangible rewards for spending time in the hoop that go beyond the physical elements and help to inspire more activity and exercise. Some participants describe this as a key influence on other areas of their lives.

*Hooping really showed me how much just physical activity in general can change your life. Any given one isn't going to be a magic bullet for every person, but if it speaks to you then keep doing it. If it makes you feel good, then keep doing it and hooping was definitely that for me.*

Participants also emphasize the unique movements required for hooping and the loosening and opening effect these movements have on the body. These effects are described especially for the hips, chest, and spine, which participants note are prone to being closed, hunched, or tight. Participants describe the added benefits of breathing more and allowing the body to be open to new movements and physical expression and expansion.

**Risks and drawbacks.**

More than half of participants acknowledge the potential for injury or physical pain as a result of hooping. Multiple participants state that hooping can be hard on the

knees, feet, and back. There can also be a tendency to push one's body to do things that it may not be ready for in pursuit of new skills and tricks with the hoop. Simpler techniques can cause pain as well if one is not using a properly sized hoop for certain movements, or when one over works the body without being mindful of one's limits and need to stretch or rest. Nearly all participants describe the risk for pain or injury as being greater if one hoops in a single direction as this can develop muscular imbalances. Participants state that injury is avoidable if one is careful and mindful of what his or her body needs. All participants find the risk to be minimal and the benefits of hooping to be worth some minor pain,

*I think that even though it can be hard on your back, it can also heal your back. It can be hard on your knees. It can also heal your knees. It just depends on being aware of your body and what it needs. And that goes for any physical activity. But I've found the drawbacks to be pretty minimal.*

Some participants who are not currently as active with hooping as they have been in the past noted some decreases in the benefits they received. One participant describes this phenomenon when asked about potential drawbacks to hooping. In her experience the more she hoops, the better she feels. She describes a need to continue to hoop in order to keep receiving the benefits she enjoys. She jokes, "*so the drawback to hooping is that your just going be hooping a lot more. Ha ha ha, so if you have a problem with hula-hooping, maybe don't pick it up. Ha ha ha.*"

### **Recommendations and observations.**

Most participants emphasize the importance of treating hooping practices as one would any other form of physical exercise and being mindful of supporting the body and

preventing injury, *“You have to take care of your body and you need to stretch. It becomes an athletic thing so you have to treat it that way and realize that you’re going to feel it.”* Stretching and strengthening activities are recommended, as well as other forms of exercise and movement practices such as yoga to support one’s hooping.

*“Learn everything in both directions, with both hands, learn every technique that way.”* The emphasis on hooping in both directions is not only described as important for preventing physical injury and structural imbalances, but also as a way to promote healthy challenges and equal engagement of the left and right sides of the body and stimulate underutilized areas of the brain. Learning to hoop in the non-dominant current reportedly allows space for new insight into one’s movements and interactions with the hoop and perceptions of themselves and their ability. One participant described this as a *“return to beginner’s mind”* and another noted the humbling effect of this effort.

Every participant also describes hooping as a healthy activity that can be beneficial to anyone. Hooping is promoted as an inspiring way to counteract many of the negative health impacts of people’s typical day-to-day demands. Hoopers report that benefits can be almost immediate and can be achieved through hooping in its simplest forms, such as waist hooping. One participant expresses her enthusiasm and belief when she describes her vision of a healthier future through hoops, *“I would love to see hoops just in the office. You know, people don’t have to bring them home. There’s just office hoops and there’s home hoops, they should be in all the schools, they should be in mental health clinics and hospitals, seriously.”*

**Mind, Emotion, and Self**

The psychological category of data contained nearly twice as many themes as any other category. There was also the highest display of data that was interconnected with other categories. Some of these themes will be elaborated on later in relation to participants' observations of the therapeutic benefits of hooping. Several participants share stories of profound healing and all participants describe experiencing significant positive changes in their lives since they started hooping.

**Clinical changes and observations.**

The majority of participants report positive changes in their mental health since they began hooping. Four hoopers report having had anxiety and/or depression starting in adolescence or early adulthood, ranging in severity, and including episodic and chronic symptoms. These four hoopers primarily report significantly decreased symptoms since they began hooping. One participant describes the shift she felt in the feeling of heaviness that depression could create for her and how hooping supported her decision to stop taking antidepressants,

*Hooping came into my life and it just made me realize that things sometimes do feel heavy, but they're really not. They don't hold any essential weight. And it's a lot easier than people think to just breathe and let it go and just play... And they hurt, but you have the power to heal them. You do, you just, you have to believe in yourself and you have to believe that they really aren't heavy. They really don't have any weight. You just feel like they do.*

Another participant notes the importance and benefit of the therapy and other help he was receiving simultaneously, and reports having ups and downs in his mood still, but

he says there has been overall change for the better. He says that hooping helped him initially by providing a sense of calm and leveling out as well as a boost in his mood. He has also been able to create a career that is more suited to him and includes using hooping to help other people and he reports being happier as a result of this change.

Hoopers report changes in their experience of stress, some saying that it forces them to look at their stress rather than avoid it. Another hooper describes a shift in her view of and response to her anxiety. Several hoopers note an increase in their confidence and level of self-acceptance and new ways of relating to their emotions. Two participants report elimination of problematic substance use and one participant reports using hoops to treat her symptoms of PTSD.

### **Social and Communal Experience**

#### **The hoop connection.**

*“The community is the most loving, open-minded, inclusive group of people I have ever met.”* Multiple participants describe feeling an automatic sense of connection with others in the hooping community. Most hoopers report meeting people and making friends they never would have encountered otherwise and three describe creating connections with people all over the world,

*My favorite people in the world have been brought to me by my hula hoop...It just paves the way to be connected with someone on the level of sharing and that’s such a genuine, kind of raw level, I think between people, when we’re sharing things and trying to teach and learn.*

Participants describe an automatic level of understanding and sense of kinship and acceptance of other members of the hooping community. There is also a reported



expanding effect as more and more localized communities are being formed and a growing number of people are connecting online. Participants frequently describe feeling a web of connection on a local and global scale, *“It’s worldwide. It’s the biggest amazement to me and how it keeps exponentially blossoming.”* A participant acknowledges the connection to the greater hoop community, but describes a sense of loneliness that can result from working at many different sites in many different communities without being able to share the whole picture of her work with someone. One hooper reports no significant change in his sense of community and a greater connection to his local community than anything else.

**Inclusiveness and the breakdown of competitive nature.**

Multiple participants note the openness of the community and report that it is welcoming of everyone. There is a frequently reported inclusiveness among hoopers. All of the participants share their belief that anyone can hoop if they have the properly sized hoop and the patience to keep trying. Hoopers report that anyone can receive benefits as well, *“there’s all kinds of people doing this and it’s for everyone.”* One hooper describes the pleasure she takes in the variety of people she gets to work with, *“I just meet a lot of different people through it, from all ages, it’s so dynamic.”*

More than half of participants describe a decrease in their tendency to compare themselves to others and in their need to compete. This has carried over into other areas of some hoopers lives in significant ways,

*I made this realization last spring that I should see people as resources, and not so much as competition, because I had this mentality kind of like, okay, I’ve got to get better, so I can do better and be better, instead of embracing people and what*

*they knew...I don't think I would have necessarily gotten there, to being noncompetitive, if it wasn't for hula hooping.*

In addition to the reported decrease in some hoopers tendencies to compare themselves to others, participants also describe increases in their ability to forgive others and reduce anger.

### **Spirituality, Meditation, and Embodiment**

Participants express a range in their experiences of spirituality through hooping. One hooper reports not being a spiritual person and five describe an increased sense of connection to their spirituality through hooping, *“When I first started I feel like I got out of hooping what a lot of people get out of going to church. Just a release of the daily grind and a reminder to kind of come back to center.”*

#### **Stillness through movement.**

All participants acknowledge the implicit meditative effects of hooping. Two report using hooping specifically as a meditative practice and three hoopers report doing other forms of meditation including mindfulness meditation. Three participants state that hooping provides more immediate effects and they find it easier than more traditional seated meditation or yogic practices they have tried, *“I think that's the important thing to remember about meditation. It's not just sitting down, it's a process of movement and there's stillness inside of that.”* This idea is echoed by several hoopers and is sometimes connected to the sense of calm that can be achieved through the rhythmic movement of hooping. Participants note that one must be focused in the present moment while hooping and this single-minded activity can allow everything else to fade into the background.

Through this stillness and centering effect participants describe developing new insights and some report a meditational effect with surprising and seemingly limitless potential,

*I was wanting some kind of a deeper understanding, but it didn't come along until hooping. And the thing about hooping is that it does continue to deepen. It's an inquiry that continues to deepen. And I can't believe it myself because it just doesn't, like how can that be? How can that be? It's so weird.*

One hooper describes the awakening effect she experienced and the mind-body-spirit connection she developed through this moving meditation, *"I just noticed that the energy started to rise and that at one point, I felt more awakened... And I love this idea that my body is part of my meditation and part of my spirituality."*

#### **Understanding spirit, self, and others.**

Several hoopers describe how hooping has helped them develop their own sense of what it is to be a spiritual being and to shape their thoughts on spirituality,

*I don't practice any major religion and so I kind of feel a little like hooping helped me focus my thoughts in that area because I didn't really know what I believed in or if I even wanted to believe in anything... So it's kind of neat, the idea that you can create your own spirituality if you need to and the hoop can help you do that.*

One hooper notes the significant impact of the level of freedom and room for grace and beauty that hooping provides. Participants describe this freedom as a way to understand what spirituality is to them as individuals, which suits them better than trying to conform to more dogmatic approaches.

In addition to personal insights, participants report feeling an increased ability to understand and resonate with other people, sometimes as a result of the meditative effects and spiritual insight they experience with the hoop,

*I think, whether you would call it traditional meditation or not, it really offers me some basic, tangible insight into the way that we are towards each other and how easy it is to act and react and how if you go really slow with something and you're gentle and you lead the hoop in this case towards the other part of your body, it's a lot easier and it doesn't hit you and it glides. And for me that's a representation of being soft, being gentle with people's feelings and not shoving and pushing. And you can feel the way that happens in the dance.*

This hooper goes on to describe how this relates to her sense of spirituality and provides a greater understanding of connection with others. Another hooper describes it as fostering a greater connection to life, *"I never really got spirituality. And then when I started having connections with life...I suddenly wanted to be filled with life, and more so every day and I saw that this could be an awesome opportunity to live and have a lifetime of gratitude and constant creation."*

#### **Finding center and the mind-body-spirit connection.**

Several participants emphasize the increased sense of connection between mind, body, and spirit and identify this as a major factor in their healing experiences, *"There is a sense of generating momentum, but allowing for relaxing into the momentum and I think it gives you that focus to find your center that automatically creates healing."*

While most participants appreciated the physical health and fitness benefits of hooping, overall there was a greater emphasis on the noticeable repair and strengthening of the mind-body-spirit connection. This was described as a sense of embodiment, or inhabiting the body in a way that joined elements of thought, emotion, and sensation. There was a frequently reported increase in degree of body awareness and a body-awakening effect that participants had not previously experienced,

*The hoop, simply by touching me physically, and giving my whole body this chance to come alive and dance, the hoop simply awakened me on the physical plane in a different way...once I was inhabiting my body, then I could take the information directly in to my body, directly, physically, whereas before I was relying on my thoughts to interpret my experience.*

The same hooper describes the new level of embodiment as the key to unlocking her pattern of loss-related depression and self-destructive behavior by allowing her to experience her grief physically and to view her emotional suffering in a new way, *“I just was miserable. I was just unrelentingly miserable... And this time, in this situation my whole being was transformed and I was able to feel it as I was going through it.”* This shift turned the pain that was once unbearable, overwhelming and difficult to understand, into something that this participant could sit with and work through rather than to deny, distract, or escape. *“The thing that had really changed was that I had become willing and able to feel my emotions physically.”* She reports a profound healing effect and a new sense of strength and wellness as a result.

Participants describe an increased sense of wholeness as a result of the mind-body-spirit connections that hooping fosters in them. This wholeness is reportedly

observable in others and helping people gain this sense is a motivating factor for some participants, *“I recognized how important the work we were doing was because it was bringing people together in a present where they can be whole. You know, whole in body, whole in spirit, whole in mind.”* Several participants identify this as an important personal development and another key healing element.

### **Interpretations of the Therapeutic Effects**

The data contained an abundance of information about the healing effects and observations of the therapeutic mechanisms at work, some of which has been discussed in earlier sections. The following are the most common themes that carried the greatest significance for participants in terms of healing and promoting mental health.

#### **Play.**

*“It’s a hula hoop, it’s like, you can’t get so heady about it. You know. It has to be about fun and play, ultimately.”* Every participant places emphasis on the importance and healing potential of play, *“I think in the way that hooping is really playful, I think it definitely helps you to not feel so intense about things, you know, things that you may need healing from.”* This is described as important for adults and children alike as a means to reduce suffering and restore joy. Several participants note a general lack of room for play in our social structures and lives, and describe hoops as natural tools to unlock the ability to play and to see life differently as a result. There is an overall consensus that this is something that is needed greatly in the world and this is a frequent motivating force in participants’ careers, hopes, and ambitions.

**Safety.**

*“It was possible for me to learn the dance form because it is an object that can be interacted with...there was just an ease to it, a safety to it and a simplicity.”* The sense of safety a hoop can provide is noted by participants who describe feeling a new level of comfort within the hoop that enabled them to do new things and put themselves out into the world in ways that they previously felt unable or uninspired to do. Participants state that the new sense of safety helped several of them become dancers and perform in front of audiences when they had never considered entering those roles before.

This felt safety is described as particularly significant for one hooper who explains how it influenced her symptoms of PTSD and helped her restore her ability to trust and feel secure in her place in the world. By acting as a safe container and a shield, and helping her connect to her body in a new way through physical contact, the hoop helped this participant to feel secure enough to reenter the world and begin to connect again by providing the space to heal her trust and recover from the harmful and lasting impact of early experiences of abuse, *“I was always on the defense because I had been hurt by people. And I didn’t trust anybody. I didn’t trust a soul, you know? So it’s been extremely healing for me that way. You know, to, to get me back to a place where I don’t feel ashamed.”*

**Emotional release and new understanding.**

Most of the participants describe the hoop’s ability to facilitate emotional release through its contact with the body and through moving with the hoop, *“I started bringing the hoop more up my chest, and that’s when I noticed more, stimulation, more emotional release, and I was just, like, blown away by it. And so I just was hooping every day after*

*that and started looking more into why it was helping me.”* The ability to connect to emotions through music and movement is also described as a way to facilitate releases of laughter or tears. One participant describes a whole new way of interacting with and interpreting emotion that she attributes to hooping, *“It became just moving, moving and feeling. Allowing feeling to move me. Allowing myself to be moved by feeling and to really just amplify and nurture the role of feeling in my life.”*

### **Empowerment and resilience.**

Empowerment is a significant theme that relates frequently to participants stories of healing, acceptance and growth. Some participants refer to empowerment to describe finding the ability and desire to become more actively engaged in life. Participants also report an increased ability to discover and activate their resilience. One hooper describes how she harnesses this resilience in her healing work with people who have experienced trauma,

*We talk, everyone gets upset, then we hoop, and we witness ourselves coming back to this state of joy. And so you’re integrating that information in a new way and you feel differently about that information, okay, so you can be wracked with horrible trauma, and feel like you’re always going to have to live this way, but you don’t actually. You can feel differently about what has happened to you.*

### **Self-esteem and self-acceptance.**

Most of the participants report an increase in their level of self-confidence and ability to accept, appreciate, or trust themselves, *“It gave me the confidence to be comfortable with every aspect of myself because I knew I had this thing that I could do*



*really well.*” This is also described as a sense of trust that helped one hooper break harmful habits she had developed and restore balance to her life,

*I think it was a way for me to step back and say that none of that really mattered and trust in myself more than trying to reach out to all of these other people and all of these other things that didn't care about me... And I think it really established a level of trust in myself that I had never experienced.*

One participant states that hooping helped her begin to notice where she was being undervalued in her life while simultaneously providing a path to the healthy relationships she was realizing she needed, *“It made me start to realize where in my life people were taking advantage of me or I was letting people get away with not respecting me the way I deserved to be respected.”* She reports that this also helped her recognize areas of her self-worth that needed repair, *“I never thought I had low self-esteem until I started realizing how much I was under valuing myself in my relationships.”* Through hooping she was able to connect with people who value and respect themselves and others, helping her to develop healthy relationships and a greater sense of her own self-worth and intrinsic value.

**Breakthrough, creativity, and self-expression.**

Several hoopers identify an increased capacity for personal breakthroughs on a physical and emotional level and a resulting expansion of creative energy. Hooping provides what one participant describes as *“a personal practice that you do where you really push yourself past certain comfort zones a lot.”* She equates the comfort zones with bad writing, *“Like you're writing a story that limits yourself and how creative you can be.”* She explains that with the help of the hoop she is able to engage with life in a

more dynamic and creative capacity, shaping experiences in new ways that foster and rely on embodiment in the process. Hoopers also report an increase in other creative or expressive activities including writing, singing, drawing, and making videos since they began hooping and an increase in self-expression overall, *“My own capacity to express myself was growing. It just grew precipitously with my interaction with the hoop and it was just impossible not to notice.”*

**Flow, rhythm, dance, movement, and joy.**

*I think the flow state is connected to every sense. And when you're focused in a moment of creation...you are simultaneously receiving and translating information into something else...you are putting present awareness toward the externalization of the internal rhythm.*

All of the participants report experiencing states of flow when hooping. The most commonly described effects of flow are improved mood and states of bliss or transcendence. One hooper notes her increased ability to achieve and recognize flow states when she is involved in other activities since she began hooping. Multiple hoopers refer to sustained spinning, where one is in constant rotation with the hoop, as their most frequent path to flow states. A participant explains *“sustained spinning is...what really puts me in the flow state, Those periods are kind of when you just feel like you are made for the earth and you are supposed to be here and everything is okay and everything will be okay.”*

Participants also emphasize the importance of rhythm, dance, and movement, not only to their flow states, but also as part of the overall enjoyment and benefits received. Several hoopers emphasize the importance of dance, and moving and creating in a way

that fully engages the body. In connection with many of these elements, the majority of participants report deriving a sense of joy, with one hooper describing a cumulative effect that continues to blossom and support her through difficulties and loss.

### **Opportunities for learning.**

*“It’s great to play and get to the next layer of learning. You never stop learning. There’s always another level.”* Every participant describes using the hoop as a tool for learning in some capacity. Most hoopers state that there is always room to learn more and do more with the hoop and some describe changes in the way they see opportunities to learn more in other areas of life. Several participants describe the hoop as a way to learn more about themselves and to focus their thoughts. Most of the participants describe the hoop as a healthy way to practice trying again after a failure, *“It gives you the chance to make mistakes and teaches you to learn from mistakes and that’s really important and it’s nice to do it in a way that’s fun.”* One hooper describes how learning with the hoop helps increase her self-confidence, *“The process of learning something and getting better always makes you realize that you’ve got more in you than you thought you did.”*

Some hoopers report cumulative effects in the area of learning and note a multiplying effect once they are able to unlock movements through repeated practice, *“I think with anything, once you’ve learned something to the point where it becomes intuitive, then there’s almost an exponential increase in what you can discover and create and do with it.”* One hooper describes these aspects of the learning process as having a significant impact on her healing. She uses hoops to unlock new movements and sensations through exploration and learning in her hooping practice,

*My goal is to find a new pathway and arrive there. Because that feeling, there is no feeling like that. It is so healing. So, that to me has been the whole key with PTSD is to create these new paths, these new neural pathways so that I'm not stuck on that same neurological loop.*

**Challenging expectations of self and other.**

Most of the participants describe significant effects that hoops have had on their expectations of themselves and others. Several hoopers describe the growth they experience through challenging themselves to do things that they had once doubted they could do, *“I first hooped when I was 35 and I couldn't hoop when I was a kid, it just was not something that I could do... And then it became something that was the center of my life and I was good at it and I did become good at it.”* This shift in hoopers' beliefs about themselves has a reported impact on several of the participants' confidence levels that has spread into other areas of their lives in meaningful ways, *“Anytime you start something new and are able to accomplish it, I think it gives you that sense of I can do that with something else.”*

Hoopers also describe the hoop's ability to create new ways of thinking about prescribed social roles. One hooper explains how hooping helped give her the freedom to overcome anxiety and design her life, *“I felt like I was just drowning the whole time and never able to live up to expectations, but really it was just crappy expectations.”* Hooping gave her the space she needed to create her own vision for her life and time to tune out external pressures, *“So the changes of like, just even going to the backyard and doing something that no one was telling me to be good at...it was like there was no external expectation for hooping to be anything and it was awesome.”* Two hoopers

emphasize the importance this carries for men who often have a harder time hooping due in part to pressures around gender roles and cultural expectations of masculinity. The benefits of shifting expectations are also reported to offer a lot to people with low self-esteem and anyone who is in need of healing as it can create room for people to begin to see themselves and their circumstances differently.

**The circle and universal love.**

The symbolism and metaphor of the circle are frequent themes throughout the interviews. Several participants report a sense of connection to nature and the forces of the world through their interactions with the hoop,

*It's also the geometry of it. It's a circle. We're all moving, the earth is spinning, the earth is moving around the sun, the galaxy is spinning, we're all moving in circles, the weather, the seasons are circles, history is a circle, we keep doing the same stuff over and over again. I think it just really establishes that sense of connection. You're connected to all of those things... you're moving in the same way and I think that is therapy in itself because it doesn't make you feel so alone.*

Other hoopers describe the significance of the endless nature of a circle and the meaning that has to them, *"The metaphor of the circle, it's infinite. It expresses the infinite. It is also the central metaphor of our own experiences of time, and being earthbound."*

Most of the participants mention the ability hoops have to make almost anyone smile and find enjoyment. One hooper describes this effect as an important element to facilitate change and growth, *"What is more universally loved than a hula-hoop, you know? Everybody loves hula-hooping. Everybody smiles, even people that normally*

wouldn't. So there's something about that, it's like a key, this sort of self-transformational instrument."

**Purpose and helping others with hoops.**

Every participant reports major shifts in their employment to include or entirely rely on hooping as a source of income. Several report feeling better suited to their new work than to more conventional forms of employment. Participants' involvement in hooping and decision to devote more time to it are reportedly fueled for some by a new sense of purpose and a desire to help others receive the benefits of hooping. There is a repeated theme of wanting to share and bring benefit to people, "*I love giving people that confidence because it translates to other areas of their life.*"

There are multiple thematic expressions of compassion and desire to help others who are in need, "*My sense of wellbeing [comes from helping] other people have a sense of wellbeing and that makes me feel better about myself.*" One hooper describes this as a profound effect driven by the benefits and insight she has gained through hooping,

*I had no idea I had a way of learning how to suffer less, you know? And that is like, how many people are needing a way to suffer less? That is a great need. It's a great need. And how simple, you know? That was just such a gift. And so that's what I really want to pay forward.*

Multiple participants report feeling that they were meant to find hooping, and two describe a sense that every experience prior to hooping was leading them to find it. One hooper describes finding her place in the hoop on her own healing journey, and the inspiration she receives to help others heal,

*I feel okay about my life, you know, up unto this point because it had to be this way in order for us to have a conversation and I'm supposed to be out there in the world and sharing it with people...I just feel really strongly that it will be really important for the healing of society, because right now... there's so much conflict in the world and hooping just immediately brings people together. It's just like a magnet for joy and inclusion and play and laughter. So that's what the world needs right now more than anything.*

Every participant teaches hooping in various ways. Hoopers report witnessing the benefits to hooping in their work with an adult men's rehab group, children and adults with learning disabilities, adolescents, children with autism, children experiencing poverty, and people who have been impacted by trauma.

### **You Know, For Kids**

Three hoopers report important benefits of hooping for children. Hooping is described as a joyful way to restore lightness and play to children's lives, especially when it has been absent for any reason. One hooper reports the hoop's ability to counteract the impact of the general lack of opportunities for physical activity and interactive play in many children's lives, *"Play is important to teach children, particularly when...kids just watch TV and play on the computer. They don't play on the streets anymore and so just to have a way of bringing that change is kind of important."* This hooper also describes using hoops to help restore a sense of fun and play for children who have entered adult roles prematurely and he uses hoops in his work with groups of adolescent parents.

Other participants describe the restorative effects that hooping can have for children who face difficult challenges in life, *"I work primarily with youth, a lot of urban*

*youth and they deal with a lot of confidence issues, and a lot of issues that kids shouldn't have to deal with and I think that this is really healing to them.*" One hooper is pursuing means of using hoops to serve children in conflict zones to help in the recovery of their childhoods through the healing play and movement that hoops provide. There is an agreement among most of the participants that hooping can help restore childhoods that have been impacted by trauma, loss, or disadvantage.

### **But Wait, There's More**

The above data is a modest representation of the themes and information contained in the transcripts. Other themes include travel, patience, forgiveness, reinterpreting stress, belief, grace, the production, use and sharing of video recordings, Sufism, the good that comes from doing something simply for your self, and doing something purely for the sake of it. Categories that could warrant their own investigations include the role of Internet and social media in the hoop community, connecting at the level of sharing, healing through the experience of watching people hoop, music and embodiment, and the power of movement.

Two participants mention the lack of money, and there is an acknowledgement of the potential for injury, but there are reported measures of risk-reduction that can also benefit overall health, such as other forms of activity including yoga, strengthening, stretching, and cardiovascular exercise. The data to support the positive and holistic benefits of hooping overwhelmingly outweighs the drawbacks or limitations that participants identify. All of the participating hoopers were generous with their time, their stories, and their support for this project.



### **Discussion**

Due to the complete lack of published research on the holistic benefits of hooping, this research covers a broad range of information that cannot all be contained in this project. The information collected from seven interviews contains one hundred themes, the vast majority of which are undeniably positive. With emerging themes such as self-acceptance, the desire to help people, resilience, healing, community building, and the mind-body-spirit connection, it is possible to draw countless connections between what is being reported by these seven hoopers and the goals and values of social work.

This research illuminates the profound level of personal transformation that can be accessed by seemingly simple means. The hoop seems to offer a unique ability to inspire and ignite people who have sometimes struggled with great burdens of sadness, fear, and shame. It has had undeniable impacts on the lives of the seven participants, just as it seems to have for anyone who gives it enough spins to develop into a practice. It is intrinsically rewarding which allows its meaning to gradually emerge for people who keep coming back to it for the soothing rhythm, fun, and joy it can provide. The meaning that develops can be as unique as each individual, and for most, it is significant and life affirming. The existence of the transformational and transcendent themes identified in this study and the early implications of the data on the spiritual effects of hooping suggest that hooping has the potential to foster a lifetime of exploration and spiritual expansion.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The benefits that hooping has to offer people who are dealing with challenges in life make hooping a natural fit and potential tool for social work at the clinical and community levels of practice. The combined effects of helping people access inner

resources and bringing people together, all in a joyful and intrinsically rewarding activity could be harnessed to foster healing and promote healthy and more peaceful communities. In many ways this is already being done in places around the world on a growing scale. Regardless of any potential social work applications of hooping, it seems that the hoop community will continue to expand and blossom on its own. The openness of the community fuels its growth and there is much that can be learned from the grassroots evolution of the movement. The hoop provides an example of a tiny spark igniting and rapidly spreading through direct, person-to-person connections and sharing. Social work can learn a great deal from these elements.

### **Clinical implications.**

The biopsychosocial and spiritual framework of social work practice helps to form a holistic and systemic view of the effects of hooping, and draw connections between hooping and social work practice. This research brings to light the inseparable nature of mind, body, and spirit through the interconnected thematic content. The benefits of hooping seem to impact multiple systemic levels, from individual to communal health. The data indicates an effect akin to mindfulness meditation and other mind-body practices, including Dance and Movement Therapy, suggesting that similar areas and functions of the brain are being activated towards healing purposes.

Connections between hooping and mindfulness based therapeutic practices include attention to a single object and the achievement of a state of openhearted and non-judgmental awareness (Kabat-Zin, 2006), as illustrated in participant characterizations of the openness of the hoop community, the personal tendencies towards reduced judgments and comparisons, and the descriptions of increased awareness

of self and others. The research suggests that hooping can provide a possible alternative or addition to meditation and mindfulness-based practices and therapies, especially for people who struggle with seated meditation. This is a common difficulty in any culture that is characterized by increasing busyness and distraction. It can also be especially challenging for people who have been traumatized or have other reasons for being unable to be present with themselves in quiet stillness.

Hooping seems to be achieving benefits similar to those reported from mindfulness practices and therapeutic applications, and appears at this early understanding to have the potential to enable holistic growth and health benefits for hoopers. These benefits are evidenced in participants' descriptions of the centering and calming effects and the increased stillness and clarity that hoopers report. Given that this is a small representative sample of a far greater number of people joining the hoop community and reporting change and healing from a hoop, it is possible to consider that the hoop may provide an enjoyable new approach to meditation, possibly serving to help meet the need for a greater variety of methods to suit current cultural factors and our neurologically diverse population (Hanson, 2009).

In addition to the reported meditative benefits, hooping combines movement, exercise, expression, and often music and other creative elements to bring added benefits to people's lives. Elements such as play and joyfulness can serve a number of client populations that are dealing with overwhelming stress, sadness, loss, and trauma. The tendency of the medical model of mental health treatment to focus on deficits can create harm and painful stigma for people who could otherwise benefit from help and compassionate treatment. By helping people access inner resources, hooping may offer

insight into new strengths-based models of treatment that emphasize individuality and personal abilities as well as inner strength, resilience, and self-worth.

The hoop's ability to defy expectations and facilitate new roles for people seems to help counteract the negative effects of anxiety and depression that can result from overwhelming societal pressure to fit a certain ideal or mold. Even without any of the other benefits of hooping, the freedom that hooping allows and the self-acceptance that can emerge for people who have spent their lives struggling with self-hatred, major depression, and anxiety, highlight the healing potential of the hoop. There are unlimited possibilities for the use of hooping in social work, ranging from simply encouraging hooping for people as a supplemental activity to established treatment practices, to the development of specific and targeted hoop-based therapies.

Hooping might also offer insight into trauma and the recovery process that one hooper describes as it is reported to restore the mind-body-spirit connection in a safe and joyful way. Our growing understanding of the role of the body in the way we process and store memories of traumatic events supports the idea that to unlock deeply held trauma-related distortions, the body must be engaged. One must be able to tolerate and be present within their body as well (Homan, 2010). Hooping seems to be providing pathways that lead quickly and directly to body engagement and a felt sense of safety and comfort within one's body, even for people who have endured tremendous trauma and the life-halting effects of PTSD.

Hooping seems to have the potential to facilitate new interpretations of experience by harnessing multiple areas of the brain, as well as the entire body which may enable new ways of understanding and responding to information and experiences much like

DMT has been shown to do (Chambliss, 1982; Homan, 2010). Hooping could conceivably provide another possible tool for connecting the verbal and non-verbal areas of the brain to facilitate a greater degree of verbal processing and pathways to understanding and identifying emotions given participants' reports of increased understanding of their emotional experiences and the consistently high degree of insight each participant shared. For most of the participants in this study, hooping appears to provide a greater sense of inhabiting the body and a more direct experience of emotion, leading to greater understanding, acceptance and integration.

**Community-based and school social work practice implications.**

The unique accepting and inclusive nature of the hoop community may help to inform new understanding and models for some areas of community social work practice. The fact that there is a simple tool being used to bring people together in profound ways suggests a potential to bring about positive means of connection and decreased conflict among and between communities. There is potential for social work to use hooping in the development of models for practice aimed at fostering and repairing community. Facilitating access to hooping and the sense of connection that it can bring to people who have previously felt isolated aligns with social work values and can help to create greater inclusion and acceptance within communities.

With the information collected on the specific benefit of hooping for children, it is worth considering ways to introduce hooping in more schools and youth programs to promote confidence, focus, healthy activity, self-expression, and positive growth and learning experiences for children and adolescents. There is potential to provide a sense of joy and balance in the lives of youth that are too often marked by turbulence, pain, and

inequity. The reported impact of hooping on resilience and the effect of transcending painful experiences, combined with our clinical understanding of the pathological effects of unresolved childhood pain and trauma, lead logically to the use of hoops to support healthy growth and development for children and adolescents.

### **Implications for Policy**

The hoop's ability to shift expectations and highlight the need for fun and creative expression in people's lives could assist in the development of new policies to promote greater holistic health and wellness in a more inclusive way than our current social structures allow. Disparities in health and education are overwhelming and to counteract the marginalizing effects of some social realities, creative, inclusive, and humanistic approaches need to be considered.

#### **Education.**

This research supports the overall benefits of creativity and activity. Policies to promote these things in all areas of life, especially education are important to our cultural and societal health. Funding cuts to the arts and sports in schools have limited children's access to creative and athletic activities that enable healthy movement and self-expression. These activities promote learning and development and can help foster increased self-confidence and acceptance. Policies that provide funding and room for the arts in education can help to promote healthy children who will be more likely to become healthy adults. Funding for hooping programs in schools can also be considered to bring the benefits of hooping directly to children. Youth who feel more centered, connected to others, self-confident, and have the ability to learn from mistakes will likely be better

prepared for development, education, relationships, and any challenges or adversity they face.

### **Health care.**

Increasing demands for mental health programs to maximize limited resources and serve more people at ever increasing costs suggest the need for more creative means of promoting health in broader capacities. With the reported maximized benefits of hooping, hoops seem like they have the potential to promote and support mind-body medicine and alternative healing methods at minimal expense. Policy to support efforts in these areas could serve to help more people prevent and recover from physical and mental illness and reduce the need for costly medical treatments. This type of policy change could include laws to broaden insurance coverage of mind-body practices, and funding for research to increase our understanding of the benefits of hooping and other alternatives to the deficits-based model of care.

### **Implications for Research**

The data collected here is a very small sample of a quickly growing number of people. There are significant findings to suggest that hooping can provide tremendous benefit and insight into healing and fostering wholeness in people. Further research into every area that this project investigates can serve to enhance our understanding of the mind-body-spirit connection and development of new means to promote personal growth and healing. New research can include quantitative measures, clinical studies, and long-term studies to support our knowledge and understanding of biological and psychological health and development through the use of hoops. An investigation into hooping and

energy medicine could also reveal new insight into the workings of the hoop and the emotional release and calm states of bliss people can achieve.

The neurobiological factors at work in some of the stories of healing shared by hoopers are worthy of investigation as we are discovering more about the role of the body in healing the mind. This may be of particular importance in understanding PTSD and the effects of trauma. Research on other specific effects hooping has on mental health can focus more intensively on depression, anxiety, and addiction. I believe further research could help to inform new models of understanding what we now identify as mental illness. This line of research is worth pursuing to develop means of reducing stigma, broadening access to treatment, and promoting empowerment.

Studies of the hoop community may lend further insight into means of bringing people together and reducing conflict. As participants state, there is a great need for these effects and as a social worker I am interested in gaining more in-depth understandings of the mechanisms at work and the unique elements of the hoop that create such instant social connections and personal transformations. Research on the hoop's apparent ability to inspire purpose and sharing across cultures could be used to develop models of social work practice that help individuals while inspiring connection, compassion, and the desire to help others.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study was based on personal accounts shared by people who have spent a great deal of time with the hoop and have largely dedicated their lives to hooping in various capacities. The level of insight into the effects of hooping offers significant understanding based on personal observations and experiences. There is a marked



consistency of the majority of the findings, which adds to the strength of the research.

Many of the findings align with the literature on the related areas of mindfulness, dance and movement therapy, exercise therapy, and positive psychology.

The sample size and exploratory nature of this study limits it in terms of the ability to generalize the data. There are possible limitations to hooping that do not come up in the interviews, primarily the accessibility of hooping for people with obstacles to mobility. This is an important consideration, especially when claiming that anyone can hoop. More research is needed to understand the limitations and true reach of hooping. Participants in this study show some diversity when it comes to geographic location, however the under-representation of men and people from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds also limits the findings.

These findings are based solely on individual experiences of people who have a deep love and appreciation for hooping, and therefore contain natural bias in favor of hooping. As this study has progressed, my own interest in hooping and the hoop community has grown due to the undeniable benefits I have witnessed in others and experienced on a personal level. It is safe to say that I love hooping and I cannot entirely contain my bias. This bias has grown as it is based on in-depth research and first-hand experience with hoops over many years, and especially over the course of this project.

### **Conclusion**

The stories of healing and self-discovery that have so generously been shared with me are in many ways incredible. While some skepticism or dismissal is understandable, what this research reveals on a small scale is the reality for many people in countries around the world. This project has only begun to help me develop my understanding of

the potential of the hoop and it has sparked a desire to continue to learn as much as I can about what hooping has to offer the world and how to maximize the impact and reach of this simple circle.

The hoop appears to have a unique ability to fit people's needs in diverse ways, as well as to connect people with a sense of their own individual qualities and capacities. Such abilities have significant implications for social work and need to be understood. The circle has no beginning and no end, but goes on infinitely. It represents life, our universe, and limitless potential. I am continuously amazed by the unfolding effects of the hoop in my own life and have a new love and appreciation after hearing the stories of the inspiring people I was able to meet through this project.

Hooping has helped to facilitate surprising physical and emotional healing for me and I feel driven to share these effects with others. My bias may exist, but it is well earned and based on the undeniable gifts of the hoop. Over the past nine months hooping has helped me rehabilitate and regain my ability to walk without pain for the first time in two years. It has also helped me find relief from stress and new ways to integrate emotional pain that I have experienced for most of my life. The hoop has provided me with a sense of community and connection with people on a level I never imagined and most importantly it has fueled my hope for our world and my belief in people's innate ability to heal and create balance amidst chaos. The completion of this project does not mark the end of my hooping inquiry. It is the start of a lifetime of learning, sharing, and healing in ways I am only beginning to understand. The possibilities may prove to be limitless. The one conclusion I am certain of is simply that the world needs hoops.

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## Appendix A

**Sample of Participant Recruitment Email**

Dear (participant's name),

I am conducting a research project on the effects of hoop dance on wellbeing from a social work point of view and I would very much appreciate your participation. The purpose of this research is to begin to build an understanding of the impact of hooping on the biological, psychological, social and spiritual health of individuals. Your experience and knowledge based on your hooping career and your level of involvement in the world of hooping will be a great benefit to my research. Your participation would involve a 45-60 minute interview with me either in person or via webcam to answer a set of questions and discuss your experiences and thoughts on the value of hooping. This interview would be arranged at your convenience and your confidentiality would be upheld throughout the research and reporting process. I appreciate your time in considering this request. If you would like to be a part of this project, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Ruth Harrington

ruthiehoops@gmail.com

University of St Thomas/St Catherine University School of Social Work

2115 Summit Avenue

Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105

## **CONSENT FORM**

### **UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

#### **Joining the Circle: Exploring the Biopsychosocial and Spiritual Effects of Hoop Dance**

**548875-1**

I am conducting a study about the biological, psychological, social and spiritual impact of hoop dance, or hooping on people's lives and I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your involvement in the hooping community and your active use of hooping in a professional or volunteer capacity. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Ruth Harrington, graduate student under the guidance of Katharine Hill, PhD, MPP, MSW, LISW, professor of social work at St. Thomas University.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of hooping on peoples' lives through the social work lens of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual health. A growing number of people are using hoops on a regular basis for physical and mental health benefits, including a reported meditative effect resulting from the rhythmic motion and the possibility of complete physical and mental immersion in the activity. This study aims to examine hooping through the biopsychosocial and spiritual framework to understand how it impacts people's lives and health and to gain knowledge of potential therapeutic benefits and applications of hooping in the context of social work.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour, answering questions regarding your experience with hooping and discussing your observations of the biological, psychological, social and spiritual effects of hooping. This one time interview can be done in person or online depending on your location. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience. The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

#### **Risks and Benefits:**

There are no direct risks or benefits resulting from your participation in this study.

#### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audio recordings and typed transcripts of the original recording. These records

will be stored in a password protected hard drive and any printed material will be stored in a locked file cabinet, accessible only by the principal researcher. All recordings will be erased after ninety days.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you, your data will not be used in this or any other research. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask without exception.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Ruth Harrington. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-227-7750 or harr1125@stthomas.edu. You may contact my advisor Katharine Hill with questions at 651-962-5809. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give my permission for this interview to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**Appendix C**

**Interview Questions**

1. What role does hooping currently play in your life and how has it changed since you began?

2. Can you describe your use of hooping as a self-expressive or creative activity?
3. Has hooping helped you cope with or reduce stress? If so, how?
4. Do you frequently experience flow states, or complete immersion in the act of hooping?
5. Have you experienced any changes in your mental or physical health since you began hooping? If so, how would you describe those changes?
6. How has hooping impacted your sense of community or social connections?
7. Have you used hooping as a healing tool in any capacity?
8. Can you identify or describe any therapeutic elements of hooping?
9. Do you practice hooping as a form of meditation? If so, can you describe this experience?
10. Do you use hooping in a spiritual capacity of any kind?
11. What are the drawbacks or limitations to hooping?
12. Does hooping promote or support anything else that is particularly important to you and your sense of wellbeing?