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Investigating the Lived Experiences of Community College Students Who Have Practiced Meditation

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INVESTIGATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO HAVE PRACTICED MEDITATION

By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved mother who I miss dearly. Thank you, mama, for sacrificing so much for me. This dissertation is a product of your love, guidance and wisdom. I also dedicate this body of work to Alina, as a partner (wife), you stuck by me through it all. My appreciation and love for you runs deep, and I will never forget how much you supported me, thank you. Last but not least, I dedicate my dissertation to my son, Keith. You are the dope-est human being I know, and I am beyond excited to walk by your side, witnessing your continued growth as you move forward in your life journey. Mom, Alina and Keith, I love all three of you, to the moon and back.

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INVESTIGATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO HAVE PRACTICED MEDITATION

Abstract

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This study investigated the lived experiences of community college students who have engaged in meditation practice during their time as community college students. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher investigated the phenomenon of meditation practice among community college meditators, while attempting to better understand the shared meaning respondents ascribed to the phenomenon, in this case meditation practice.

Data was collected from eight respondents, generating four overarching themes, and several subthemes. All respondents who participated in the study reported perceived psychological benefits that they attributed to their meditation practice. Psychological stress was the motivating factor, a common a thread among all respondents, that led students to exploring meditation practice as a tool to alleviate their psychological discomfort. Each of the respondents stated that their meditation practice increased their awareness, generated feelings of acceptance, cultivated a sense of calm, improved mental clarity, and promoted expansive perspective-taking. All eight respondents experienced an overall increased capacity to navigate difficult thoughts, emotions and physical experiences, oftentimes extending into more adaptive external behaviors. Six of the eight respondents reported that their meditation practice contributed to improved focus and attentional abilities. According to all the respondents, meditation practice contributed to

their development of mindfulness, and this mindfulness development was incorporated in their daily lives – a particularly promising finding. The presence of a formal meditation course, a qualified teacher and a community of meditators contributes to initial meditation practice development, as well as continued practice for community college students. Challenges associated with meditation practice such as lack of time, difficult relationships, and mind-wandering were reported as well.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"that life giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness. . . when we catch sight of the soul, we can become healers in a wounded world–in family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in political life" (Palmer, 2004, p. 2).

On the morning of November 8th, 2018, which happened to be my birthday, I left my home to head into work, just as I had done so many mornings previously. Leaving my driveway, I looked up to see a beautiful, dark orange sunrise, a rare and atypical site. It quickly occurred to me, that this was indicative of a wildfire casting smoke over a sunrise, creating such a beautiful color. What unfolded over the next several hours, forever changed my life, and the lives of an entire community. On November 8th, 2018, the Camp Fire essentially destroyed the entire town of Paradise, California, a town once inhabited by 27,000 plus residents. Paradise was aptly named, as it was home to green, lush forests, and wildlife that shared this beautiful space with the human residents.

The wildfire devastated the community of Paradise, while the neighboring communities within Butte County grappled with how to negotiate such a catastrophe as well. The local community college, Butte College, was heavily and negatively impacted by this natural disaster, and in fact, the main campus located below the Paradise ridge was nearly destroyed by the fire. Hundreds of Butte College students and staff were directly impacted by the wildfire – over 870 students and 130 employees lost their homes.

The Camp Fire was a traumatic event that contributed to the psychological distress of many Butte College students, and staff. Unfortunately, the communities within Butte County had long been experiencing community trauma, as reflected by data gleaned from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey study conducted in 2013. Sadly, Butte County had the highest number of reported adverse childhood experiences in the entire state of California.

During the data collection phase of the current dissertation study the global community was in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic, and still is.

Within the above context, the students of Butte College have had to exercise a resilience that is unfathomable, as they navigate their community college experience. Unfortunately, many Butte College students are unsuccessful in negotiating the psychological trauma that comes with overcoming a natural disaster, community trauma (ACEs), a global pandemic, all the while facing a variety of other challenges, factors that will be unpacked in chapter two of this dissertation.

It is of critical importance to recognize that the students of Butte College are not alone in having to negotiate psychological trauma associated with multiple layers of adversity. Community college students as a whole are experiencing increasing amounts of psychological and physical stress leading to poor mental health outcomes as a direct result of the factors mentioned above. The following sections describe the community college system, highlighting key aspects of these higher education institutions, while demonstrating the increasing challenges community college students face as they pursue their higher education goals.

Nearly 36% of college students in the United States begin their higher education journey at a community college (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, about 5.6 million students enrolled in community colleges during the fall of 2017 semester (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Community colleges have been touted as institutions that serve society in very important ways – providing coursework that prepares students for transfer to four-year universities, cultivating vocational skills for students who will enter into the workforce, and finally, promoting life skills necessary for navigating life successfully (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Belfield & Bailey, 2011; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Pusser & Levin, 2009). Community

colleges are often referred to as open-access higher education institutions, allowing an affordable option for college, while providing students who are not adequately prepared for four-year universities to acquire the academic skills necessary for transfer and successful transition into four-year colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Berkner, Choy, & Hunt-White, 2008).

As stated above, community colleges serve as gateways to better opportunities including affordable college options, technical skills for careers, college skill-building in preparation for transfer to universities and certificate programs. However, the low success and completion rates of community colleges has generated concern among educators, researchers, and policy makers (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015a; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Success rates at community colleges most often refer to outcomes related to degree attainment/program completion and/or transfer to four-year universities. In addition to the degree/program completion initiative, completion time is being scrutinized. Currently, community college success standards utilize a six-year window as a marker for success (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). According to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse (2017), 27% of students who started at a community college in the fall of 2010 either transferred or obtained a degree from the institution they began at within a six-year period. In general, within six years, 39% of community college students completed a program either at the institution they began their program, or at a different institution (Juszkiewicz, 2017).

Over the past decade several initiatives have been enacted to address the low rates of community college completion and transfer (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Initiatives such as improvements to developmental education, First Year Experience programs, California's

Student Success Act, and now most recently Guided Pathways have been created and implemented to address the low success rates at community colleges (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2012; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Hatch, 2016).

Research exploring community college success rates suggest that due to the open-access model, many students who enroll at community colleges face a multitude of barriers that hinder their ability to achieve the academic goals they pursue (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004; Sanburn, 2017). Community colleges enroll nearly half of all students of color, while serving roughly forty percent of students considered as under resourced (Mullin, 2012). Low-income students at community colleges outnumber middle and high-income students 2 to 1. Furthermore, it is estimated that 14% of community college students may be homeless (Sanburn, 2017).

In addition to the socio-economic barriers many community college students face, mental health as well as other psychological and cognitive factors play significant roles in the academic experiences of community college students (Arria, Caldeira, Vincent, Winick, Baron, & O'Grady, 2013; Gilbert, Murphy, & Pardeck, 2005; Katz & Davison, 2014; Ley & Young, 1998; Quinn, 2014;). For example, in a study conducted by the Community College Task Force & American College Counseling Association (2010), 67 counselors from 54 community colleges reported that they most often saw students for the following: stress (89.4%), depression (89.4%), anxiety disorders (84.8%) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (27.3%). Community college students may also struggle with the rigors of higher education coursework due to insufficient self-regulation skills (Ley & Young, 1998).

Unfortunately, most community college students lack institutional support to deal with the mental health and cognitive issues that this population must negotiate while pursuing their academic goals (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Epstein, 2015; Gallagher, 2014; National

Center for Education Statistics, 2005). To illustrate this point, there is no mandate for community colleges to provide therapeutic support to address mental health faced by the students they serve. Such a mandate is official policy of both the University of California and the California State University systems. Furthermore, the University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) Survey conducted in 2013 revealed that the nationwide counseling center ratio at 4-year public universities is 1 counselor per 1,738 students. Six California community colleges were informally polled, and results revealed that there is 1 counselor per 8,551 students (Reetz, Barr & Krylowicz, 2014). Considering the lack of coordinated mental health support for community college students, what possible resources and/or student services programming could be developed and implemented to meet the psychological needs of these students? Meditation represents a viable tool for community college students seeking ways to improve their mental health.

Contemplative practice, an umbrella term that includes specific practices such as mindfulness and meditation, represents a wholistic approach to education that may serve as a practice to improve mental wellbeing (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010). The term contemplative practice refers to various methods of mental and behavioral training that alter cognitive and emotional processes (Davidson, et al., 2012). Through first-person, direct experience, contemplative practices address critical aspects of the learning process such as attention, concentration, motivation and emotional regulation (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.).

Meditation, a particular form of contemplative practice, has increasingly been utilized by college students in a variety of capacities to support their learning and contribute to their wellbeing (Crowley & Munk, 2016; Penberthy et al., 2017; Regehr, Glancy & Pitts, 2013;

Schwind et al., 2017). Growing bodies of research suggest that meditation practice can lead to a variety of positive results for college students including reductions in stress and anxiety (Bamber & Schneider, 2016; Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008), improved attention (Burger & Lockhart, 2017; Gu, Xu, & Zhu, 2017; Lester & Murrell; 2018), increases in ability to regulate emotions (Canby, Cameron, Calhoun, & Buchanan, 2014; Dubert, Schumacher, Locker, Gutierrez, & Barnes, 2006; Enríquez, Ramos, & Esparza, 2017) and improved sleep (Chen, H., 2018; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014).

Although there has been a proliferation of research providing compelling evidence that meditation offers potential benefits to college students, the majority of the research examines university students. In fact, most of the research on meditation related to educational settings, has emerged from K-12, university, and four-year college professional program settings. A fundamental gap exists in the research – community college students have largely been ignored as it pertains to meditation research. Considering the unique nature of community colleges, including the diverse needs of community college students, understanding the experiences of community college students who practice meditation should be explored.

Statement of the Problem

Community colleges offer higher education opportunities for students who would not otherwise be able to pursue post-secondary educational aspirations through an open-access model (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). Students who enter the community college system, are often doing so while navigating multiple barriers to academic success (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011; Mullin, 2012; Sanburn 2017). Examples of common barriers faced by community college students include financial, food and housing insecurity, parental responsibilities, demanding schedules due to employment,

lack of social capital related to higher education demands and inadequate academic preparation (Miller, Pope & Steinmann, 2005; Mullin, 2012).

Community college students face discrimination due to race, ethnicity, gender identification, and/or immigration status. In addition to the previously mentioned sociocultural factors associated with poor success rates, the mental health of community college students is a growing concern (Quinn, 2014; Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 2016). Poor psychological health is associated with negative academic outcomes for community college students (Katz & Davison, 2014; Manzo, Jones, Freudenberg, Kwan, Tsui & Gagnon, 2011). Oftentimes referred to as non-academic factors, psychological elements such stress and anxiety hinder students' ability to effectively pursue academic goals and maintain progress (Miller, Pope & Steinmann, 2005).

Concerns over low success rates of community college students have prompted the creation of state and federal level legislation as well as increased localized efforts to address these low success rates (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; California Community College's Chancellor's Office, n.d.; Hatch, 2016). However, financial restraints and lack of institutional prioritization limits the ability of community colleges to adequately address the psychological needs of students (Katz & Davison, 2014), therefore, many community college students must navigate their higher education experiences without institutional supports focused on their psychological wellbeing.

Research suggests that meditation may be a helpful tool in improving the psychological health of community college students (Crowley & Munk, 2017; Kraemer, O'Bryan, Johnson & McLeish, 2017; Penberthy et al., 2017). However, the vast majority of studies investigating meditation and college students focusses on four-year university students. Therefore, a critical gap exists in meditation research – little is known about the lived experiences of community

college students who practice meditation. Phenomenological research allows for the investigation into a phenomenon not well understood (Creswell, 2013). This transcendental phenomenological study explored and attempt to better understand the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and more fully understand the phenomenon of meditation practice as experienced by community college students. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenology approach, the study explored the ascribed, shared meanings of the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation.

Research Questions

Citing Clark Moustakas' approach to transcendental phenomenology research, Creswell (2013) suggests that well designed transcendental phenomenology research studies utilize inquiry frameworks consisting of two, broad and general questions posed to respondents: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? The current study's aim was to understand more fully the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation. Situated within this goal, as a means to address the contextual element of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach, the research investigated and attempted to shed light on how contextual elements contribute to the lived experiences of community college meditators. Therefore, Moustakas' approach above aligns well with the researcher's investigative goals.

The overarching research question for this study was:

- What are the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation?

The following are secondary questions guided the investigation:

- What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices?
- What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students?

Significance of the Study

Community colleges, whether due to lack of resources related to staffing and funding, as well as due to misguided policy, are not adequately addressing the mental health needs of community college students (Gallagher, 2012; Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 2016). There is also a dearth of empirical studies focused on community college student success factors as compared to other levels of the educational system, which includes K-12 institutions and universities (Crisp, Carales & Núñez, 2016). Healthy psychological development or lack thereof, impacts community college student academic success outcomes (Luke, Redekop & Burgin, 2014). Contemplative practice, such as meditation, when utilized by students both inside and outside of school settings, has the potential to positively influence psychological wellbeing of practitioners, thereby leading to more positive academic outcomes (Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan & Barbosa-Leiker, 2015; Crowley & Munk, 2017; Lawlor, 2014).

There is a paucity of research that has been conducted examining the psychological experiences of community college students who are utilizing meditation methods specifically. Therefore, the study addressed a fundamental gap in the research aimed at investigating meditation practice among community college students. Furthermore, more research should be conducted utilizing transcendental phenomenology as a theoretical framework to undergird research investigating the psychological experiences of meditators. Attempting to fully understand individual subjective experience associated with meditation practice without

honoring the influence of sociocultural elements such as power, wealth, culture and other larger, salient societal forces is a limiting approach. Moustakas'(1994) transcendental phenomenology research framework requires a contextual exploration of an experienced phenomenon, therefore, such a theoretical foundation allowed for an investigation into subjective meditation experiences and the contextual elements influencing individual experiences.

This study informs community college instructional and student services faculty as well as administrators about how to meet the growing needs of community college students. Additionally, the study may offer insight into how community college students can utilize meditation in practical ways as a means to improve psychological wellbeing. Lastly, at a systems level, the study will contribute to a body of research that underscores the importance of framing how community college students experience psychological development through meditation practice within a larger, ecological context.

Conceptual Framework

At its core, phenomenological research is an approach to qualitative inquiry that seeks to understand the shared, lived experiences of individuals who encounter a common phenomenon. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is often credited as being the pioneer of modern phenomenological inquiry. Husserl's research led to his firm belief that objects exist independently, and that an individual's observation of their experiences related to these objects are indeed accurate representations of their consciousness (Husserl, 2014). Such a philosophical stance frames this study, as meditation practice experiences can only be understood in terms of how the practitioners make meaning subjectively of these very personal experiences (Kornfield, 1979).

The goal of phenomenologists is to reduce individual experiences and create a description of a shared essence that emerges from investigating the phenomenon as it is subjectively experienced by individuals (Creswell, 1994). Phenomenology centers on inquiry focused on psychological experience and inherent social structures (Patton, 2002). Utilizing phenomenology as the theoretical lens is an ideal approach, as it aligns well with the foundational research question of this study: What are the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation? Furthermore, considering respondents of the study had experienced the phenomena, they were a critical source of knowledge (Giorgi, 1997).

Understanding the lived, psychological experiences of individuals can only be fully understood if the historical, social, cultural and political phenomena that undoubtedly shape individual psychological experiences are taken into consideration (Teo, 2015). Exploring the lived experiences of community college students who meditate must be done so while incorporating a conceptual framework that recognizes how the forces of power, culture, history, and other contextual factors impact individual psychological experiences (Fox, Prillettensky & Austin, 2009). Critical psychologists recognize that subjectivity is embedded primarily in societies, histories and cultures (Rexilius, 1988; Teo, 2015).

Along with critical psychology (CP), phenomenological inquiry has also contributed to the conceptualization that individual subjectivity is heavily influenced by larger systems and as such, this philosophical lens drives the work of critical psychologists as a means to understand the psychological experiences of the individual (Zahavi, 2005; Stam, 1998). In terms of conducting psychological research, critical psychology "rejects the notion that problems, methods, interpretations and applications are independent from the sociohistorical context from which they emerge" (Teo, 2015. p. 247). Community college students must navigate their

educational experiences while negotiating sociocultural elements that heavily impact their lives, contextual aspects that most likely impact their meditation practice experiences. In an effort to honor the interplay of subjective individual experience and social forces, Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology, a particular phenomenological approach, frames this study.

Definition of Key Terms

The continuous challenges that arise during research on meditation are largely due to inconsistent definitions of meditation (Lutz, Jha, Dunne, & Saron, 2015). Furthermore, the dynamic and often misunderstood relationship between mindfulness and meditation as practices perpetuates the difficulties inherent in meditation research. Therefore, for purposes of this study the following definitions are necessary.

Transcendental Phenomenology Research: Transcendental phenomenology and psychological phenomenology are terms used interchangeably to describe a phenomenological approach to research that focuses more on the description of the experiences of respondents, and less on the interpretations of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

Contemplative Practice: "Forms of mental and behavioral training that are intended to produce alterations in basic cognitive and emotional processes, such as attention and the regulation of certain forms of negative affect, and to enhance particular character traits that are considered virtuous, such as honesty and kindness" (Davidson et al., 2012, p. 147).

Mindfulness: "A kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is" (Bishop et al. 2004, p. 232).

Meditation: "A family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration" (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 228).

Sociocultural Psychology: Examines the influences of social and cultural environments on behavior. Socioculturalists argue that understanding a person's behavior and subjective psychological experiences requires knowing about the sociocultural context (racial and ethnic identities, societal values, power, wealth, etc.) in which the subjective psychological experiences and behavior occurs (Matsumoto & Juang, 2013).

Subjective Psychological Wellbeing: Subjective psychological wellbeing is defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life" (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2005).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction that outlined how critically important addressing the psychological wellbeing of community college students is. Community colleges by in large, serve the most marginalized individuals in society, by offering open-access educational opportunities. However, these same vulnerable populations experience barriers to their psychological wellbeing directly related to the sociocultural contexts of which they must navigate. Meditation represents a potential mechanism that may contribute to improved psychological health of community college students. Little research has been conducted that specifically investigates the meditative experiences of community college students, and there is little understanding of the shared experiences of community college students who practice meditation. In order to fully understand the community college student meditator experiences, phenomenology as a theoretical framework situates the study as a means to explore the contextual elements of the shared, meditation experiences of the respondents.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature, while also illuminating the need for further research in order to address the gaps in knowledge that exist – a focus on understanding the experiences of community college students who are practicing meditation. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology and methods that will be used to execute the study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Community College Landscape

Chapter 1 introduced the study, the research problem as well as the significance of the study. Also, key terms and the theoretical framework were discussed. Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature that supports the rationale that further investigation into the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation, and how these meditation practice experiences impact their psychological development is a necessary research endeavor.

The release of the U.S. Commission on Higher Education report in 1948, known as the Truman Commission report, initiated an educational movement in the United States that situated community colleges as the primary vehicle for expanding access to higher education (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). Enrolling over six million students, which constitutes roughly 30 percent of all degree granting postsecondary institutions, community Colleges play a critical role in higher education in the United States (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). Community colleges have historically focused efforts on increasing access to higher education, particularly for marginalized student groups who have experienced inequities related to college access (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012). Community colleges operate under the open-access model, which refers to the non-selective manner of how students are admitted to community colleges. There are no grade point average (GPA) requirements nor standardized test score requirements that community college students must meet in order to attend a community college. The increasing pressure for community colleges to maintain and increase access to higher education continues to grow (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Former President

Barack Obama's American Graduation Initiative reflected a national movement focused on utilizing community colleges as vehicle for increasing the educational access, job skill development and college degree attainment for historically marginalized students (Obama, 2009).

Community colleges are a critical piece to the higher educational process, especially for traditionally underserved populations seeking a college education. Many baccalaureate recipients, especially students in California and Florida, begin their higher education journey at community colleges. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015), in the 2013-2014 academic year, 46 percent of students who obtained a four-year degree at a university had previously attended a community college. Furthermore, the technical training offered at community colleges serve students who wish to enter the employment field with required professional skills. Many critical career fields such as nursing, computer science, firefighting, law enforcement, welding, auto repair, construction, etc., employ a high proportion of professionals who received their training at a community college (Cohen et al., 2014). In short, community colleges represent a vehicle that offers social mobility for students who otherwise would not access such a path (Dougherty, Lahr & Morest, 2017). However, operating as open-access institutions of higher education, community colleges face dynamic challenges as they attempt to serve their students (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2016; Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005).

Although community colleges have been heralded as vehicles for higher educational opportunities among minoritized and under-served student populations through the open-access model, low success rates suggest that this model is not working (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). According to Leigh and Gill (2003) as well as Rouse (1998), individuals from middle-class

backgrounds may in fact be the students who are meeting their college educational goals at higher rates compared to more marginalized populations.

Community college students face a multitude of barriers that force them to address day-to-day issues, making it difficult for these students to focus on academic tasks (Chaplot, Cooper, Johnstone, & Karandjeff, 2015). Oftentimes, community college students struggle to balance their academic obligations with schedules constrained by jobs, family commitment, child-rearing responsibilities and other non-academic obligations (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2016). Community college students tend to be less college-ready, and typically have access to fewer financial and social resources (Hagedorn, 2010). Students who attend community college oftentimes do not enter higher education with clear academic plans, leading to lack of motivation (Bailey et al., 2015; Karp, 2013).

The Psychological Wellbeing of Community College Students

Although mental health is a growing concern for all levels of education in the United States, community college students may experience higher rates of poor mental health (Quinn, 2014; Katz & Davison, 2014). The American College Health Association's (ACHA) 2013 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) revealed that community college students experienced sleep disorders, with insomnia being the most common, bipolar disorder, substance abuse and schizophrenia at significantly higher rates than students attending four-year colleges. Furthermore, community college students report higher incidences of emotionally and physically abusive relationships (Quinn, 2014). Students at community colleges experience higher rates of suicide ideation and attempt suicide more often than their four-year college counterparts. (Quinn, 2014).

According to relatively recent studies of student mental health at California colleges, community college students have more severe psychological concerns and fewer institutional mental health resources than university students (Katz & Davison, 2014; Manzo, Jones, Freudenberg, Kwan, Tsui & Gagnon, 2011). A critical gap in mental health support is reflected by the limited available counseling services. For example, 88% of community colleges do not have a psychiatrist or other licensed professional on staff to provide services, while suicide prevention services are offered at less than 50% of the community colleges (American College Counseling Association, 2014). Additional concerns include the issue of counselor to student rations. The ratio of counselors to students at community colleges is 1 to 3,000, compared to 1 to 1,600 at four-year institutions (Gallagher, 2013).

Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, and Cady (2018) conducted a survey through the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, Temple University, reporting that 37% of students at Butte College, a community college in northern California, experience psychological distress, examples being depression and anxiety. In addition, 12% of the student population reported that they struggle with ADHD. Community college student psychological needs appear to be increasing, while services and support to ensure these needs are met remain stagnant. A programmatic, curricular and student-centered shift that adopts contemplative practices, specifically meditation, as educational tools might contribute to positive changes in the mental health of community college students.

In 2017 the American College Health Association (ACHA) surveyed 48,000 college students to assess college student health, and the results indicated that 64% of the students reported feeling extremely lonely in the past year. Loneliness has been defined as a situation in which a person experiences a subjective deficiency of social relationships in a quantitative or

qualitative way (De Jong-Gieveld, 1987). Loneliness can be conceptualized as two distinct types: a deficiency of close and intimate relationships leading to emotional loneliness, and social loneliness, characterized by the lack of social networks and relationships (Sadler & Weiss, 1975). College students oftentimes experience both kinds of loneliness, and if not addressed, loneliness can lead to serious negative consequences impacting cognition, emotion, behavior, and health (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). The rise of anxiety and depression experienced by college students is cause for concern, and loneliness is a common psychological factor associated with both college student depression and anxiety (Moeller & Seehus, 2019). In sum, the mental wellness of community college students is an urgent crisis needed to be addressed. A programmatic, curricular and student-centered shift that adopts contemplative practices, specifically meditation, as educational tools might contribute to positive changes in the mental health of community college students.

The individual, subjective psychological experiences of community college students must be understood in terms of how contextual elements contribute to these psychological experiences. Marginalized students, including low-income students, women, first-generation students and students of color utilize community colleges as a vehicle to access and proceed through the higher educational process (Handel, 2013; Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004). Racial and ethnic factors associated with the lived experiences of community college students greatly impact their higher education journey. According to Shaun Harper, executive director of the USC Race and Equity Center the community college system in terms of curriculum and hiring practices plays a major role in the systematic marginalization of students of color attending community colleges:

> There are tremendous racial inequities on the California community college campuses. You have a mostly white faculty teaching a mostly Latino, Black, Asian and Pacific

> Islander population. Therefore, the curriculum tends to not be reflective of those students' cultural histories and identities and interests. Most Black and Latino employees work in food service, grounds keeping, or low-paid secretarial roles. If you are a Black student at one of these community colleges and the only Black employees you really see are custodial workers or food service workers, it conveys to you quite powerfully how Black people are positioned at the institution. (Harper, 2020, para. 5)

Community college students may encounter discrimination, obstacles erected by race, ethnicity and gender (Cejda & Hoover, 2010; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Research into discrimination suggests that discriminatory practices contribute to poor psychological health of those being discriminated against (Paradies, 2006; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Issues of economic structures also contribute to the psychological stress experienced by community college students (Dohrenwend, 1998; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017). Negotiating financial instability while pursuing academic goals is a common challenge for community college students (Chaplot, Cooper, Johnstone, & Karandjeff, 2015). Approximately four-fifths of students attending community colleges are employed, working on average thirty-two hours per week (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Financial instability compels many community college students to drop out of school (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017).

The aforementioned contextual realities that many community college students face are prominent forces influencing individual psychological development. Although research has explored associations between contextual elements, such as sociocultural factors, and the psychological wellbeing of community college students (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2016), studies in this particular realm are scarce. However, there is enough research to suggest that the psychological health of community college students must be understood in terms of the contextual factors that influence the mental wellbeing of community college students. This study will attempt to add to the literature in this area, specifically exploring the interplay between

subjective, psychological experiences associated with the meditation practices of community college students and the contextual realities present in these students' lives. The proposed study underscores the importance of investigating how meditation impacts the psychological development of community college students utilizing a systems approach.

Contemplative Practice

"We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And the know the place for the first time."
-T.S. Elliot, 1943, *Four Quartets*

Contemplative practices refer to a plethora of practices, strategies and methods originally rooted in contemplative traditions. Utilizing a modern scientific lens, contemplative practices are "forms of mental and behavioral training that are intended to produce alterations in basic cognitive and emotional processes, such as attention and the regulation of certain forms of negative affect, and to enhance particular character traits that are considered virtuous, such as honesty and kindness" (Davidson et al., 2012, p. 147). Holistic approaches to improve health are increasingly being embraced by Western culture. In societies that value holistic approaches to health and wellness, contemplative practices are typically normalized. Contemplative practices involve the deep contemplation of self, the environment, and spirit, oftentimes leading to an increased awareness of human beings being connected to a greater whole (Levine et al., 2019).

Contemplative practices may take the form of a variety of activities as illustrated by Figure 1. (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2019). Specific examples of contemplative practices are contemplative inquiry, mantra recitation and visualization (Dorjee, 2016). Figure 1. provides an excellent visual of how diverse contemplative practices can be.

The illustration captures (see the branching) the categories of contemplative practices – ritual, stillness, generative, creative, movement, activist and relational.

Although contemplative practice is an umbrella term encompassing a multitude of practices (Figure 1.), meditation, mindfulness and yoga are the most popular contemplative practices associated with Western practitioners (Davidson et al., 2012). It is estimated that 8% of adults in the United States practice some form of meditation. A specific example of how Americans have adopted contemplative practice to cultivate wellness is demonstrated by the fact that 24% of patients with cardiovascular disease (CVD), have incorporated some form of mind-body therapy into their lives (Levine et al., 2019). To date, the most researched contemplative practices within educational settings are mindfulness and meditation practices. Due to the popularity of, and growing research on mindfulness and meditation in the West, including within educational settings, and, the gap that exists regarding research on contemplative practice in general among community college students, the current study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation.

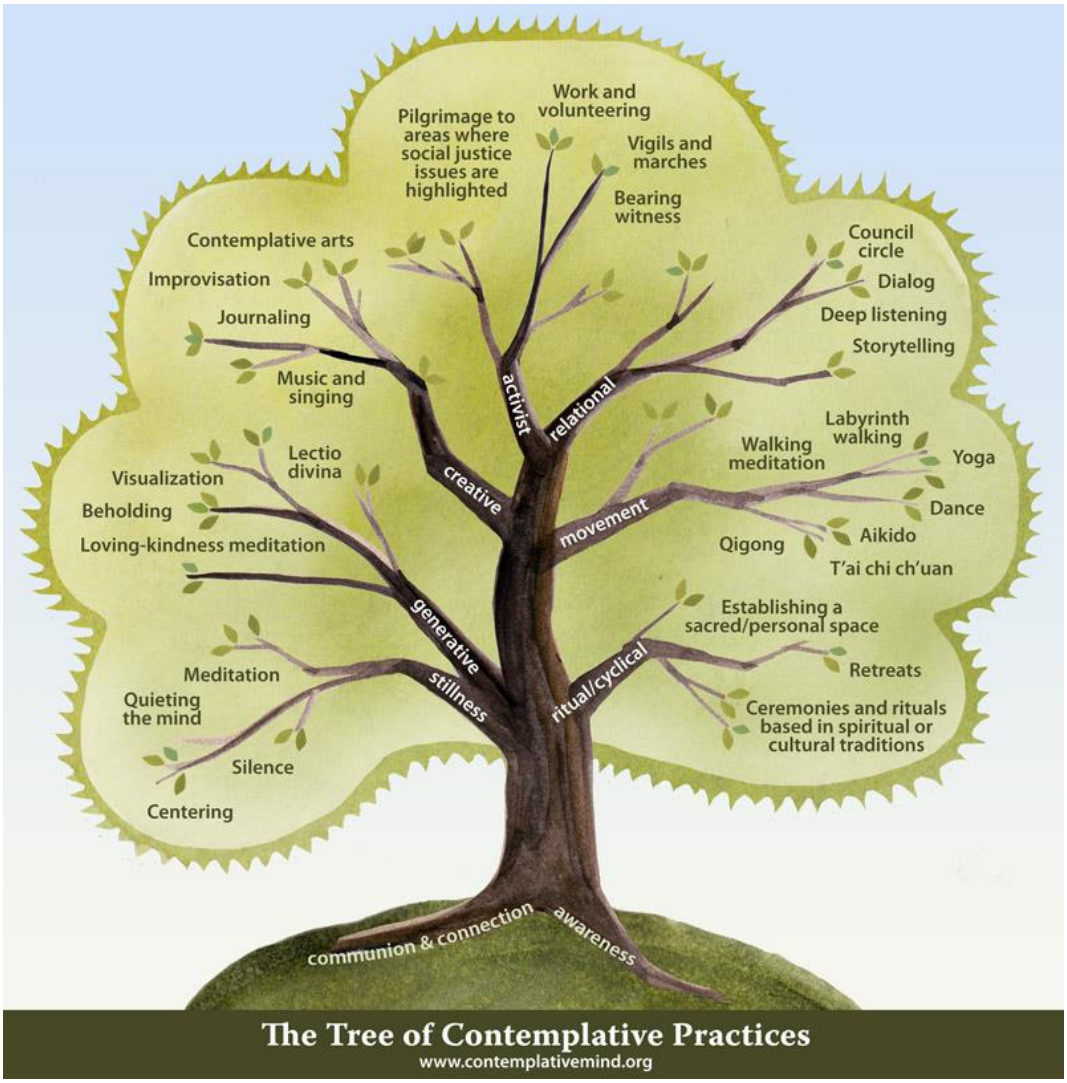

Figure 1. The Tree of Contemplative Practice (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2019)

Meditation

Just as contemplative practice is an umbrella term, meditation is also an umbrella term often used to describe an array of practices, processes and characteristics (Bodhi, 2011; Schmidt, 2011). Meditation practice is most often associated with Eastern contemplative traditions (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Thera, 2014); however, meditation has progressively gained popularity in the West over the past couple of decades (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007). The utilization of

meditation in secular contexts such as in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, medicine, neuroscience and education is an established practice and growing (Baer, 2003; Creswell, Pacilio, Lindsay & Brown, 2014, Davidson, et. al, 2012; Shapiro, Brown & Astin, 2011). The terms mindfulness and meditation were defined earlier, and it is important to understand how these concepts relate to one another. While there is a particular meditation technique referred to as mindfulness meditation, the general consensus among meditation researchers, meditation practitioners as well as meditation traditionalists, is that mindfulness is a quality of presence developed and product generated through meditation practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Carmody & Baer, 2007).

Research on meditation has steadily increased since the late 1990s (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007). Particular interest has been focused on the outcomes generated by the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt & Walach, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The proliferation of meditation research has led to findings suggesting meditation practice improves executive functioning (Teper & Inzlicht, 2012; Gallant, 2016), attention and focus (Lutz, Dunne & Davidson, 2008; Jha, Krompinger & Baime, 2007; MacLean et al., 2010), as well as decreases stress and anxiety (Goyal, et al., 2014; Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010; Wolkin, 2015).

An area of meditation research that continues to evolve focuses on the purposes and the intended outcomes of meditation as well as the results associated with meditation practice. Meditation has been a contemplative practice for thousands of years, across many cultures. The aims of historical meditation practice typically focused on spiritual growth, personal transformation, or transcendental experiences such as enlightenment (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). Keng and colleagues (2011) note that secular forms of meditation are steadily emerging as

interventions to address biological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of wellbeing. Meditation has become a popular tool utilized by individuals and groups to improve attentional abilities, cultivate mindfulness, increase compassion and/or empathy, reduce stress and anxiety, as well as to generate more cognitive flexibility (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen & Brittion, 2017; Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). The next section will dive deeper into the research on meditation in terms of specific meditation practices and the associated physiological and psychological changes attributed to meditation practice.

The mechanisms of meditation. Mechanism can be defined as an established process by which something takes place or is brought about (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). An alternative definition of mechanism defines mechanism as being a part of a whole or system (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). The following section utilizes the term mechanism as way to explore the process, and individual elements that constitute meditation practice. Just as there are many motivations bringing practitioners to meditation practice, there are varying meditation practices that involve different approaches/processes as well as intended goals and associated outcomes as experienced by a meditator (Cahn & Polich, 2013; Manna et al., 2010). Understanding the processes and outcomes associated with the varying types of meditation practices is still an area of inquiry needing further investigation (Austin, 2011; Burke, 2012; Manna et al., 2010).

What is known however, is that the regulation of attention and awareness is the central commonality across the various meditation practices (Austin, 2011; Davidson, 2017; Walsh & Shapiro,2006). Classifying meditation into two general categories is now commonplace among meditation researchers as a way to conceptualize and frame inquiry into meditation practice. The two categories are referred to as focused-attention meditation, and open monitoring styles of

meditation, dependent upon how attentional resources are directed (Cahn & Polich, 2013; Goleman, 1988; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008).

During focused attention meditation practices, "one utilizes the capacity to monitor the focus and attention, while detecting distraction, disengaging attention from the source of distraction and (re)directing the and engaging attention to the intended object" (Manna et al., 2010, p. 46). The intended object one orients attention to and tries to maintain focused awareness on that Manna and colleagues (2010) mentions in the previous sentence, is often referred to as the "object of meditation" or "anchor" in many meditation circles (Rogers, 2016). The most common anchor used during FA meditation is the breath (Verhaeghen, 2017).

Open monitoring meditation typically requires the utilization of an anchor initially in order to build focus and concentration (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). According to researchers of meditation practice (Verhaeghen, 2017; Manna, et al, 2010) once focus and concentration have been cultivated, awareness is allowed to open to whatever internal or external experiences arise, examples being thoughts, emotions, sounds, smells and physical bodily sensations. According to Rapgay & Bystrisky (2009), meditation practitioners utilizing the open monitoring meditation approach go through different phases that include the development of attentional focus on an intended object, such as the breath, observing one's thoughts and emotions without being identified with them, and observing adaptive and maladaptive thoughts when they arise and disappear, while recognizing triggers and consequences.

Focused attention meditation and open monitoring meditation practices are oftentimes conceptualized as distinct from each other. As described briefly above, Open monitoring meditation requires some degree of mental stability and calmness of mind. Therefore, in both secular and Buddhist practices many meditation practitioners start with focus attention

meditation to train their minds to access more concentration, and then eventually move onto open monitoring meditation practice once the ability to initially quiet the mind is a less effortful task. In other words, there need not be a strict dichotomy between focused attention and open monitoring styles meditations, as both meditation types regulate attention and meta-cognition utilizing different apertures – focused attention meditation associated with narrower aperture while open monitoring meditation is associated with a wider aperture (Dahl, Lutz & Davidson, 2015; Isbel & Summer, 2017; Lutz, Jha, Dunne & Saron, 2015).

Another category of meditation growing in popularity in the West is compassion-based or loving-kindness meditation (Hoffmann, Grossman & Hinton, 2011). Loving-kindness meditation is generally described as a constructive meditation that utilizes cognitive training leading to affective mental state changes, and ultimately to prosocial empathic feelings, attitudes and intentions (Dahl, Lutz and Davidson, 2015). During loving-kindness meditation awareness is focused on self-awareness as well as compassion toward oneself and others. Practitioners of loving-kindness meditation intentionally generate positive attitudes toward others while wishing them wellbeing and happiness during the meditation (Hofmann, Grossman & Hinton, 2011). "Compassion meditation can nudge you toward the positive end of the outlook dimension; it strengthens connections between the prefrontal cortex and other brain regions important for empathy" (Davidson & Begley, 2012, p. 224).

The three different meditation orientations outlined above are distinct in important ways, however; despite their differences, these meditation approaches share common psychological processes. Each of the three meditation categories are associated with enhanced attentional stability and meta-cognition (Isbel & Summer, 2017; Raffone & Srinivasan, 2009). According to Yordanova and colleagues (2020), there exists fundamental gaps of understanding in three

critical areas as it pertains to the major categories of meditation practice. It is not well understood (1) whether these practices cultivate a generic mental state that underlies meditation-specific cognitive and affective processes; (2) whether generated states of awareness and attention are fundamentally different; or (3) whether these meditative approaches embody distinct features while sharing some commonalities.

Furthermore, Davidson and Dahl (2017) express their concerns regarding gaps in research on meditation practice. One, contemplative practices entail myriad practices associated with regulating the mind and body in intentional ways, with diverging means and ends:

> In particular, it is important to call attention to the families of practice and modes of training that are excluded when we focus on the particular style or approach, even one as broad and ill-defined as 'mindfulness.' Mindfulness practices typically emphasize attention and awareness as the primary foci of the training process. While certainly important, there are other equally important families that may also impact attentional processes, but which are primarily designed for different ends. (Davidson & Dahl, 2017, p. 63)

It is important to reiterate that meditation is an umbrella term, referring to a variety of practices. Thus, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in meditation in terms of specific practices and their associated benefits (Chen, Berger, Manheimer, Forde, Magidson, Dachman & Leuez, 2012).

Davidson and Dahl (2017) also call into question the lack of investigation as it pertains to practice dosage. Lingering questions remain such as is it more effective to practice in multiple, brief sessions in a given day, or in one longer session? Is daily, consistent practice more impactful than say periods of intensive practice such as retreats? Such questions have not been well explored. As Davidson and Dahl (2017) postulate, the particular approaches, dosage and outcomes of meditation may depend on the individual's context. Understanding the dose-response relationship as in how much is needed to experience positive results of meditation is of

great interest to meditation researchers. For example, a study produced results revealing that beginning meditators may improve their attention in terms of less mind-wandering from only eight minutes a day of meditation practice. The same study also exhibited that two weeks of meditation practice has shown to improve working memory and focus leading to better scores on the graduate record examination (GRE), a standardized exam used by graduate schools to determine an applicant's eligibility for the program. Finally, the study also demonstrated that thirty hours of practice appear to positively impact molecular markers of cellular aging (Goleman & Davidson, 2017).

A randomized control trial of the efficacy of the Koru mindfulness program, a meditation curriculum designed specifically for college students requiring students to practice meditation for ten minutes a day at minimum, for four weeks, generated results showing significant correlations among changes in perceived stress, sleep problems, mindfulness and self-compassion (Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James & Rogers, 2014). According to Verhaeghen (2017), data from standard Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs suggests that twenty-eight minutes of daily meditation over an eight-week period leads to moderate to large effects. As the previous statements outline, there is no agreed upon figure as it relates to dose-response relationships of meditation. However, based upon research on meditation duration and frequency, an average of ten minutes a day of regular practice appears to be a minimal marker leading to positive outcomes.

Hölzel et al. (2011) conducted a controlled, longitudinal study to investigate pre-post changes in the gray matter regions of meditator's brains who participated in an 8-week, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. Findings suggest that participation in the MBSR program is associated with changes in gray matter concentration in the brain regions

involving learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking. A critical takeaway from the study, however; is the fact that participants who experienced such changes, practiced meditation daily for an average 27 minutes. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that significant, lasting and positive psychological changes resulting from meditation practice, are dependent on consistent practice, consisting of a minimum dosage of session time (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Verhaeghen, 2017). Utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore meditator experiences in-depth as this study aims to do, may offer insight into how different practices and the duration of practice contribute to the psychological development of community college students involved in such practice.

Associated neurobiological and psychological benefits of meditation. Meditation research has also shed light on the neurobiological changes associated with meditation practice (Brewer, Worhunsky, Gray, Tang, Weber & Kober, 2011; Tomasion, Fregona, Skrap & Fabbro, 2012; Verhaeghen, 2017). Electroencephalogram (EEG) is a test used to evaluate the electrical activity in the brain. Electroencephalogram research on meditation has investigated changes in brainwaves as a result of meditation. Cahn and colleagues (2006, 2010) have discovered that meditation practices increase the amplitudes of slower brains waves – alpha and theta. However, differing practices that reflect the different mechanisms explained earlier may lead to dissimilar results as it relates to brainwave changes. For example, open-monitoring styles of meditation as practiced by long-term meditators, have been shown to increase occipital gamma power (Cahn, Delorme, & Polich, 2010). Such a discovery is promising, considering researchers such as Goleman and Davidson (2017) suggest gamma wave fluctuations in the brain are associated with mental clarity/aha moments. Interestingly, preceding the gamma wave fluctuation, the brains of participants in such studies experience a surge in the slower alpha brain wave (Kounios &

Beeman, 2009). Therefore, the alpha wave and gamma wave in integrated fashion may play critical roles in the creative/problem-solving process (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). In turn, cultivating such brain states through meditation practice could potentially help community college student's problem solve in ways that improve psychological wellbeing and lead to better cognitive function.

Additional research on meditation and the associated brainwave changes suggests that when meditators practice mindfulness meditation, a form of opening monitoring meditation, frontal midline theta activity is generated by the anterior cingulate cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, or dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (Asada, Fukuda, Tsunoda, Yamaguchi & Tonoike, 1999; Ishii et al., 1999; Lagopoulos et al., 2009). Such neurobiological findings are salient indicators pointing to the potential benefits of meditation, as individuals who exhibit greater theta activity in the brain tend to have lower state and trait anxiety scores (Inanaga, 1998). Meditation practice leading to enhanced frontal theta brainwave activation is associated with a variety of positive mental health states and traits (Shapiro, 1980; Takahashi et al., 2005; West, 1987).

In addition to the relationship of brainwave activation and meditation practice, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), research has also provided findings that speak to how meditation activates brain regions that are critical to healthy psychological functioning (Davidson, 2010; Goldin and Gross, 2010). Functional magnetic resonance imaging measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. Meditation research utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging has demonstrated that long-term practice can lead to structural changes in the brain (Tomasino et al., 2013). Studies utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging technology suggest that mediation changes the cortical thickness and plasticity of certain brain regions (Kang et al., 2012; Lazar et al., 2006). Such structural changes

may be associated with functional changes in the sensory, cognitive and emotional processing abilities of practitioners (Lazar et al., 2006). Yu and colleagues (2011) discovered that focused attention meditation leads to increased activation of the anterior prefrontal cortex (PFC). A number of studies suggest that activation of the anterior prefrontal cortex during meditation leads to improved attentional control and emotional regulation, thereby reducing feelings associated with negative mood (Davidson, 2010; Goldin and Gross, 2010; Yu et al., 2011).

Kang and colleagues (2013) conducted cross-sectional research, a research design that measures the prevalence of health outcomes or determinants of health, or both, in a population at a point in time or over a short period, discovering increased cortical thickness in the superior frontal cortex, frontal medial prefrontal cortex, and temporal areas for meditation subjects compared to the controls. The increased cortical thickness in these brain regions correlate with improved attentional and emotional regulation capacity. According to researchers the practice of Sahaj Yoga Meditation, a particular meditation technique founded by Nirmala Srivastava that focuses on cultivating awareness of Kundalini energy throughout the body, leads to increased grey matter volume and regional enlargement in several right hemispheric cortical and subcortical brain regions that are associated with improvements in attentional control, self-regulation, compassion and interoceptive perception (Hernández, Suero, Barros, González-Mora & Rubia, 2016). Research into loving-kindness and compassion-based meditation practice demonstrated increased cortical thickening in the left ventrolateral prefrontal cortex and anterior insula of meditators, structural changes that are correlated with increased altruism and prosocial attitudes (Enghen, Bernhardt, Skottnik, Ricard and Singer, 2018).

A study investigating meditation related brain activation found that meditation may lead to decreased activation in the amygdala (Desbordes, Negi, Pace, Wallace, Raison & Schwartz,

2012). According to neuropsychological research, decreased activity of the amygdala is associated with reduction in emotional reactivity (Desbordes et al., 2012, Taylor et al., 2011). Neuroscientific research shining light on the neurobiological changes that emerge as a result of meditation practice, and the associated psychological and behavioral developments, demonstrates the potential for positive, profound change for those who practice meditation. The following sections demonstrate evidence of psychological and behavioral changes associated with meditation practice.

A fundamental psychological outcome associated with meditation practice is increased awareness (Baer, 2003; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011). The underlying quality of attention meditation can cultivate is a present-centered, mental and physical awareness in which meditators are not ruminating about past experiences, or future possibilities (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, Valk et al., 2017). One's ability to be present is strongly correlated with increased psychological wellness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Blanke, Riediger, & Brose, 2018). Increased awareness experienced by meditators includes internal processes such as cognitions and emotions (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015), enhanced awareness of bodily sensations (Daubenmier et al., 2012), and increased awareness of others in terms of compassion and empathy development (Lim, Condon, & DeSteno, 2015).

Studies suggest that meditation leads to improved attentional capacity as well (Chan & Woollcott, 2007; Jha et al., 2007; Tang, 2014; Tang et al., 2007). A pilot study of mindfulness meditation training for adults with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), generated results suggesting meditation practice reduces symptoms related to this disorder. A discovery of this sort is promising, and more research is necessary to generalize findings across college student populations. Along with improved attentional abilities, meditation practice may lead to

improvements in working memory (Chambers, Lo & Allen, 2007; Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong & Gelfand, 2010; Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David & Goolkasian, 2010). As described earlier citing the neuroscientific research, other studies suggests meditation improves one's ability to regulate emotions (; Leyland, Rowse & Emerson, 2019; Tang, Tang & Posner, 2016; Teper, Segal & Inzlicht, 2013). See figure 2 for a model of meditation that outlines how attention, emotion regulation and awareness are integrated, leading to self-regulation (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015).

Meditation is essentially a self-regulation practice that involves the training of attention and awareness. The process of this self-regulation training leads to an ability to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control, thereby fostering the development of psychological wellness along with specific capacities including calmness, clarity and concentration (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Figure 2 offers a model that captures such a mechanistic process.

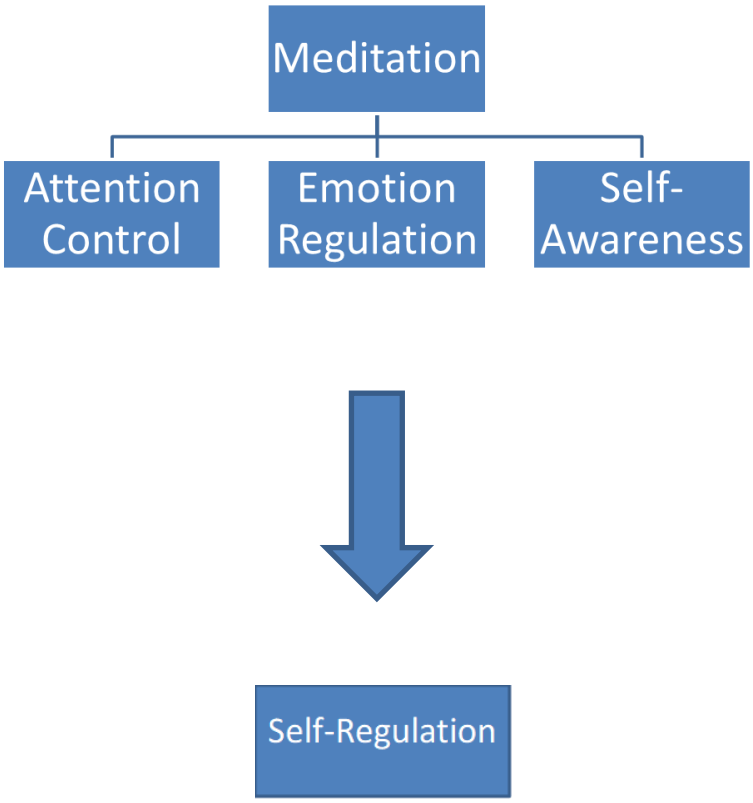

Figure 2. Model of Meditation (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015)

Related to improved emotion regulation, meditation practice may reduce the symptoms/severity of anxiety, stress and depression (Goyal et al, 2014; Tang, 2014; Teasdale et al., 2000). In one study Luiselli and colleagues (2017) found that high school seniors reported decreased negative affect, and increased feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance as a result of engaging in a mindfulness curriculum designed for adolescents. The students also experienced improvements in emotion regulation. Researchers conducted an investigation that demonstrated when utilized as an intervention, meditation may decrease state and trait anxiety of adolescents with learning disabilities (Beauchemin, Hutchins & Patterson, 2008).

Gratitude is strongly associated with psychological wellness (Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2009). Meditation practice may increase one's sense of gratitude according to research exploring the psychological benefits of meditation (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002). Kyeong and colleagues (2017), discovered that gratitude meditation, the act of intentionally reflecting on the things you are grateful for while using the feeling of gratitude as your object of meditaion, leads to activation in certain brain regions involved in adaptive emotion regulation and increases in self-motivation. Additional research suggests that meditation generate a certain quality of mindfulness, leading to the development of gratitude (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002).

Perspective-taking is a psychological act and process that is critically important to one's mental wellness (Webster, Bohmeijer, & Westerhof, 2014; Stalarski, Mathews, Postek, Zimbardo, & Bitner, 2014). Perspective-taking is the function of perceiving a situation or understanding a concept from an alternative point of view. Cognitive distortions, and core beliefs developed through dysfunctional thinking may hinder one's ability to develop different perspectives, leading to poor psychological health outcomes (Beck, Davis, & Freeman, 2014).

Mindfulness development may precipitate increased cognitive flexibility, allowing one to perceive experiences from different vantage points, ultimately leading to increased psychological and physiological wellness (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007; Mathur, Sharma, Balachander, Kandavel, & Reddy, 2021; Pollan, 2019). A study exploring the impact of a college level meditation course on student wellbeing found that participation in the course contributed to shifts in perspective as evidenced by a student's account (Crowley & Munk, 2016):

> Meditation has allowed me to have more perspective in my life, I find that meditating helps me realize that most of my problems are trivial and there are more important things in the world (p. 94).

Bishop and colleagues (2004) described mindfulness as, "A kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is (p. 232)." Such a process, one that appears to be inherent in mindfulness development, may be the catalyst involved in perspective-taking development. As presented earlier, mindfulness is oftentimes conceptualized as a product, as well as mechanistic element of meditation practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Carmody & Baer, 2007). Valk et al. (2017) conducted a study that revealed individuals who practiced meditation over a 39-week period increased their perspective-taking capacity, evidenced by behavioral measures and neurobiological markers. To date, a gap in research specifically exploring the role meditation plays in the development perspective-taking among community college students exists. Therefore, further exploration into how meditation contributes to the development of perspective-taking among community college students is warranted.

Meditation and the college student. Meditation has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes for the four-year college student population (Crowley & Munk, 2017; Dvořáková et al., 2017; Lester & Murrell, 2018; Tubbs, Savage, Adkins, Amstadter & Dick, 2018). Research suggests that meditation can improve the sleep quality of college students in the university setting (Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin & Greeson, 2010; Dvořáková et al., 2017; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James & Rogers, 2014) and lead to decreased college student alcohol abuse (Bodenlos, Noonan & Wells, 2013). These findings are promising, as college students have historically struggled with problems associated with sleep and substance abuse (Arria, Caldeira, Vincent, Winick, Baron & O'Grady, 2013; Gaultney, 2010). However salient the above findings are, the following sections will place a focus on the growing research of the psychological benefits for college students that are associated with meditation practice.

Studies of four-year university students have generated results showing improvements in areas of attention and focus as a result of meditation practice (Gu, Xu & Zhu, 2016; Modesto-Lowe, 2015; Murrell, Lester & Sandoz, 2015). In one particular study, 24 novice meditators experienced improved attention after practicing 13 minutes of mindfulness meditation (Greif & Kaufman, 2019). Taiwanese university students improved in the attention aspect of cognitive performance after just on one-semester of a mindfulness meditation course (Ching, Koo, Tsai & Chen, 2015). One other study that assessed the effects of a mindfulness and meditation course taken by international students generated results suggesting the course led to improved attention and awareness. This improvement was noted during the course period, and mindful attention and awareness continued to improve after participation in the course (De Bruin, Meppelink & Bögels, 2014). Researchers at Yale University and Swarthmore College discovered that even a brief, ten-minute meditation practice may lead to improved executive attentional control in inexperienced meditators, as highlighted in improved performance on cognition and memory tasks during the experiment (Norris, Creem, Hendler & Kober, 2018).

College student memory may be improved through meditation practice as well (Bonamo, Legerski & Thomas, 2014; Ching, Koo, Tsai & Chen, 2015). A study investigating the impact of meditation on the academic performance of African American college students yielded results that suggest meditation practice may improve memory, leading to improved academic performance compared to control groups who do not practice meditation (Hall, 1999). Mrazek and colleagues (2013) conducted a study that generated findings suggesting the working memory of college students may be improved after a two-week mindfulness meditation course.

Research has suggested that university students who practice meditation may decrease their levels of anxiety and stress (Burgstahler & Stenson, 2019; Lemay, Hoolahan & Buchanan,

2019; Vidic & Cherup, 2019). In one such study, Gorvin and colleagues (2019) found that meditation contributed to the development of more self-compassion and mindfulness, that in turn led to self-perceived reductions in stress among college students. College students who completed a six-week yoga and meditation program experienced a reduction in stress and anxiety, suggesting that practicing meditation as little as once per week may reduce stress and anxiety in college students (Lemay, Hoolahan & Buchanan, 2019). Bamber and Morpeth (2018) conducted a metanalysis of research investigating the effects of meditation on college student anxiety. The researchers located 25 primary studies, providing 28 comparisons, with 1,492 participants. Overall, when compared with controls, meditation interventions had a large and significant effect in decreasing college student anxiety. It is important to note, that Bamber and Morpeth (2018) state that future research should examine the specific needs of subgroups, explicitly referring to men vs. women, and graduate vs. undergraduate students.

The majority of research investigating the positive psychological impacts of meditation practice experienced by college students has focused on university students, reflected by the literature in the previous sections. Research investigating community college student meditation experiences does certainly exist, however, literature on the experiences of community college meditators is sparse comparatively speaking. One such study revealed that community college students who participated in a school-based mindfulness and meditation course experienced negative psychological outcomes (Burrows, 2017). It is important to note that the researcher who conducted the study reported that the data from student and teacher interviews suggests a lack of teacher training and poor course design, factors impacting student psychological outcomes. The findings from Burrow's investigation highlighting the negative psychological

experiences, and the issues concerning teacher preparation and course design are further discussed in a subsequent section of the literature review.

Research investigating the impact of a mindfulness breathing intervention implemented in a community college composition course revealed that students who received the intervention experienced a statistically significant decrease in writing apprehension and mechanical error scores from pre- to post-test when compared to students in the comparison class sections (Britt, Pribesh, Hinton-Johnson, & Gupta, 2017). A dissertation study conducted by Muchenje (2017) utilizing a descriptive correlational design examined the associations between mindfulness and test anxiety in 226 students at a rural California community college. The findings revealed that higher levels of mindfulness were associated with lower levels of test anxiety. Nascent research exploring the experiences of college students who have practiced meditation is promising, however; there is a dearth of evidence regarding the meditation experiences of community college students.

Challenges associated with meditation practice and practice supports. This section provides a review of literature that highlights challenges associated with meditation practice. Practice supports, resources and process that contribute to the development, success, and persistence of meditation practice among meditators, are also discussed.

Based on the growing research in the field of meditation inquiry, it appears that meditation training may represent a curricular, therapeutic and programmatic element that could positively contribute to the academic success and mental health of college students. However, meditation practice may present certain challenges, challenges in terms of negative psychological and physiological experiences. Irving et al. (2009) contends that the scientific literature on meditation is limited due to the "absence of research on the potentially harmful or negative

effects (p. 65)" of meditation practice. Results from a previous study assessing 27 meditators revealed that 62% reported adverse effects, including depression and anxiety, with 7% describing more profound issue such depersonalization.

A qualitative study was conducted exploring the experiential challenges associated with meditation practice. Lomas and colleagues (2014) interviewed 30 male meditators in London, United Kingdom and discovered that respondents experienced poor psychological outcomes. According to the findings, meditation was a difficult skill to learn and practice. Respondents had difficulty managing discomforting thoughts and emotions that emerged, and some respondents even reported that meditation practice exacerbated existing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. In a few cases, meditation was linked to psychotic episodes. A psychotic episode, or psychosis, reflects an experience in which an individual loses touch with reality. Burrows (2017) conducted a phenomenological study that assessed the experiences of community college students and teachers involved in a school-based mindfulness meditation course. Students reported both positive and negative psychological experiences. Experiences associated with negative psychological outcomes included feeling disorientated and disconnected, as if the boundaries between themselves and others were melting or dissolving, as if they were on autopilot, a loss of spontaneity and their sense of self, and being flooded by intense and overwhelming emotions and sensations including an increased heart rate (Burrows, 2017).

The number of studies that demonstrate the potential side effects of meditation practice pale in comparison to those that highlight the potential benefits of meditation. Such a contrast does not necessarily mean meditation presents no potential risks to the psychological health of meditators, rather, this fact might represent the need for more inquiry into the potential negative

side effects of meditation practice, and how educators might prevent or mitigate such unintended developments.

In addition to the potential negative psychological and physiological outcomes associated with meditation, barriers to developing and continuing the actual practice exist. Meditation practice requires commitment and intentional scheduling. Persistence of practice can be a challenge for all meditators, especially college students (Erogul, Singer, McIntyre, & Stefanov, 2014; Lemay, Hoolahan, & Buchanan, 2019). Lack of knowledge of, or proper training in meditation practices are potential barriers to practice as well (; Lemay, Hoolahan, & Buchanan, 2019; O'Driscoll, Byrne, Mc Gillicuddy, Lambert, & Sahm, 2017). Additionally, a perceived lack of time may impede the meditation progress of practitioners (Gryffin, Chen, & Erenguc, 2014). One particular study conducted by Gryffin, Chen and Erenguc (2014), utilized the Knowledge, Attitudes and Beliefs (KAB) survey, a popular quantitative tool to measure a research participant's knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about a particular activity, to determine college student perceptions regarding the use of meditation. Nearly half of the students reported that lack of time was a major barrier. Perceived lack of self-efficacy represented a barrier, evidenced by the finding that 12.6% of the students stated a lack of knowledge as well as a lack of confidence were barriers to practicing meditation.

As stated in the literature review in previous sections, short-term meditation practice can produce short-term, positive psychological results (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014). However, the psychological benefits generally do not persist over time without regular practice, and significant positive changes are typically linked to long-term practice (Hölzel et al., 2011; Verhaeghen, 2017). Consequently, understanding how to best support practitioners of meditation, in particular community college students who must

navigate competing interests and responsibilities during their meditation practice experiences, is a critical area of inquiry. The term support here, is being utilized in the context of exploring the conditions necessary for college students, community college students in particular, to develop and maintain a practice aligned with optimal frequency and dosage criteria.

Burke and Hassett (2020) contend that most individuals who practice meditation would highly benefit from formal resources and training. During an interview with NPR, Erica Sibinga, professor of pediatrics at John Hopkins School of Medicine, said the following: "Mindfulness when delivered in a high-quality structured program can be beneficial for youth." Dr. Sibinga added, "We can't immediately assume it's effective when delivered in other ways" (Kamentz & Knight, 2020).

Aligning with Dr. Sibinga's declaration above, Crowley and Munk (2016) recognize that more studies need to be conducted to assess the impact of integrated meditation curriculum within college settings. Furthermore, more inquiry into the methodology of how the curriculum is delivered is necessary. Lastly, Crowley and Munk (2016) propound that more qualitative research should be conducted to more fully understand the experiences of college students participating in formal, campus-based meditation courses, and how these students can be better supported as they develop their meditation practices. Burrows' (2017) phenomenological study investigating the experiences of community college students and teacher participating in mindfulness mediation course cited earlier, addressed the inquiry gaps stated above. Not all students had positive experiences, and Burrows reported that vulnerable students, characterized as students who came to the study experiencing risk factors such as previous mental health issues and low socioeconomic status, particularly struggled learning and adopting mindfulness

meditation practice. According to Burrows, the findings suggested that there was a need for more teacher training, knowledge and ongoing support for the students involved in the course.

The Koru mindfulness program provides a model of how a formal course, taught by a qualified meditation teacher has enhanced the experience of college students learning how to meditate. The Koru curriculum is taught by teachers who undergo an extensive training and certification program (Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014). A similar example of how a formal meditation course has positively contributed to the mediation experiences of college students is captured by Crowley, Kapitula, and Munk (2020), who conducted a before-after observational study of two groups of college students enrolled in either a semester-long experimental meditation course, or a non-meditation, psychoeducational class. Students in the meditation course increased average subjective happiness and mindfulness attention awareness. Mindfulness scores increased and anxiety decreased more for students in the meditation class compared to students in the psychosocial class. Unlike Burrows' (2017) study, the Koru program students, nor the students who participated in the semester-long meditation course study (Crowley, Kapitula, & Munk, 2020) were asked to provide feedback on what made these formal meditation training experiences particularly successful.

The meditation course involved in Crowley and Munk's (2016) study cited previously, consisted of weekly, required class attendance and participation, and weekly written contemplations as well as reading *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) were required. According to the researchers, the class was primarily an experiential course, requiring students to practice various kinds of meditation, and limited instructor-led lecture was involved. Students participated in interactive work with partners or in small groups. Crowley and Munk (2016), assert that peer interaction was used to facilitate community and provide opportunities

for questions and discussion. The results from this study highlight the importance of quality program design and proper teacher training when offering a formal, integrated meditation course on a college campus. Furthermore, understanding how the students experience the different elements of such a curricular experience, instructor's abilities, scope and sequence, resources used as teaching tools, is necessary to better support students involved in such opportunities, to improve upon the delivery of the curriculum and to inform future practice.

Phenomenological experiences of meditators. As discussed earlier, meditation refers to a variety of practices that differ in approach and their associated, specific outcomes (Cahn & Polich, 2013; Manna et al., 2010). Considering community college student meditative experiences have not been explored in depth, it is difficult to make any judgments regarding the potential benefits of such practices for their lives specifically. Furthermore, if and how contemplative practices such as meditation contribute to the psychological wellbeing of community college students is not well understood. Research on meditation has yielded results that suggest through intentional practice utilizing attention and awareness, positive psychological development emerges during, and as a result of, meditative experiences. In-depth exploration into the meditative experiences of community college students is in its infancy, however.

While quantitative studies have generated findings that suggest meditation may lead to positive outcomes for college students, specifically in areas of psychological wellbeing (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018), a critical gap exists in understanding the processes, explanations of why and how phenomena emerge, as well as the range of meditation-related effects. Patton (2002) asserts that understanding particular cases in depth, while getting at meanings in context within dynamic environments is best done using qualitative approaches to inquiry. A first-person account of one's experience before, during and after meditation practice is a useful and necessary element

when exploring the nuances of meditative practice (Morgan, 2012; Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen & Britton, 2017).

Previous phenomenological approaches to meditation research have generated common themes, or as expressed in phenomenological research terms shared meaning or "essence" (Moustakas, 1994). For example, a transcendental phenomenology study investigating meditation discovered the following themes or shared meanings described by respondents: (1) the transcendence of the self, (2) experiencing a different sense of reality and (3) the emergence of positive emotions (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994). The study conducted by Burrows (2017) utilized a phenomenological framework to assess the experiences of community college students and teachers who participated in a school-based course on mindfulness and meditation. Findings from this study provided insight, as discussed above, on how teacher training and course design impact the experiences of community college students who participate in mindfulness/meditation courses.

Kornfield (1979) asserts "Basic phenomenological groundwork is essential to the fuller understanding of the meditative process and to the construction of valid research models (p. 41)." Lutz, Jha, Dunned and Saron (2015) propose combining the phenomenological research approach with a neurocognitive approach, a phenomenological matrix (PM), to study meditation as a way to explore the variance in differing practices and outcomes associated with such practices. Lutz and colleagues (2015) state that the PM allows researchers to better investigate the observable, instructible and manipulable features of experience that are most relevant to meditation practice.

According to researchers who have utilized a particular interview instrument, Micro-phenomenological Interviews (MpI), there is a paucity of research investigating the moment-to-

moment, qualitative meditation experiences of meditators, at different stages, who are utilizing various forms of meditation techniques (Petitmengin, van Beek, Bitbol, Nissou, & Roepstorff, 2019; Pryzembel & Singer, 2018). Pryzembel & Singer (2018) conducted research utilizing Micro-phenomenological Interviews to assess the experiences of meditators during their use of three distinct meditation techniques - breath awareness, observing-thought and loving kindness meditation techniques. Their findings revealed that there are differential affective, physiological and sensory experiences associated with the respective meditation techniques (See figure 3). Previous research that has utilized the phenomenological approach to investigate the meditation experiences of meditators from a first-person approach has yielded helpful insights, adding to the meditation-focused, scientific literature. There still exists fundamental gaps in research: understanding the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation. Furthermore, the lack of inquiry into the psychological experiences of community college students who have practice meditation utilizing a research method that accounts for the context in which such psychological experiences emerge is a critical area of research that should be addressed.

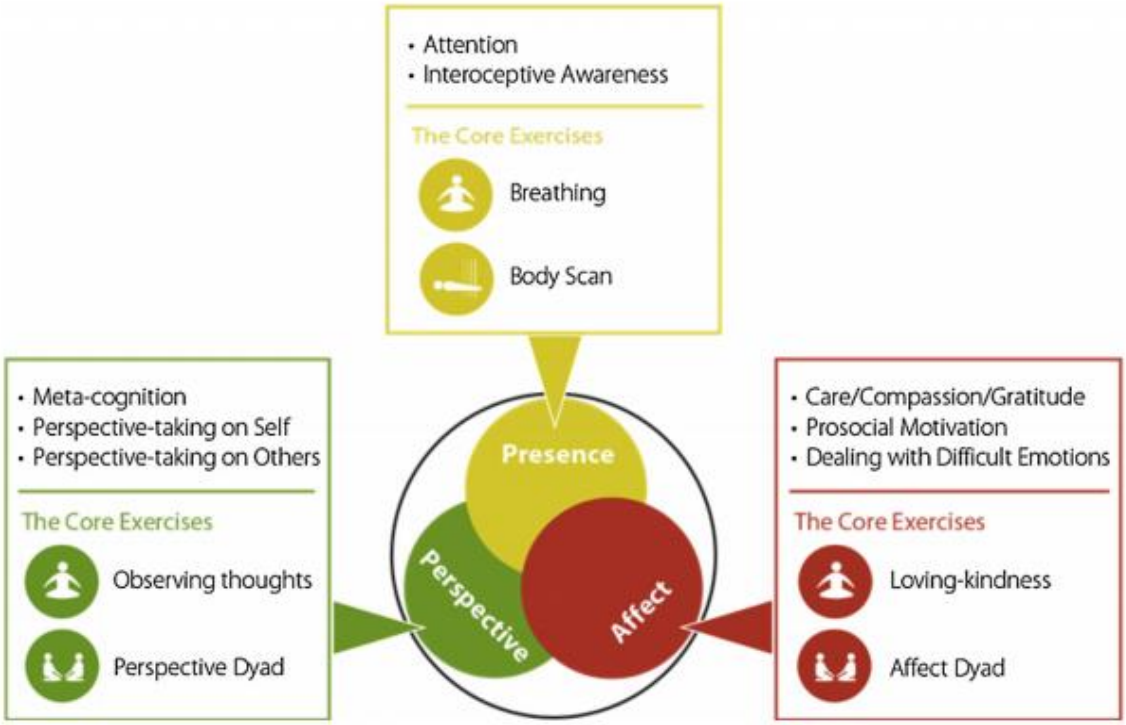

Figure 3. Affective, Physiological and Sensory Experiences Associated with Meditation (Pryzembel & Singer, 2018)

Summary

Chapter 2 presented a literature review that began with a discussion regarding the current community college landscape, a context necessarily impacting the experiences of students navigating higher education within this system. Community college students must navigate their higher education learning experience amidst everchanging political, financial, ecological, and social realities that may hinder their academic progress. The psychological wellness of community college students is an urgent matter to be addressed. Although community college students appear to be experiencing more and more psychological stress, there appears to be little mobilization at the institutional level to address these growing mental health concerns.

Upon reviewing the literature on the role contemplative practice plays in the development of college students, it appears meditation practice represents a potential, teachable

skill that has shown potential to support the healthy psychological development of college students in a variety of domains. However, as Chapter 2 revealed, the majority of the research investigating the relationship between college student mental health and meditation has occurred within university settings, revealing the need for further inquiry into how meditation practice impacts the psychological experiences of community college students. Chapter 2 reviewed literature regarding the challenges associated with meditation practice, as well as, supportive practices that might contribute to positive mediation practice experiences among college students. Finally, the literature review section discussed previous phenomenological research findings related to meditation practice, while underscoring the need for more meditation practice inquiry utilizing a phenomenological methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation. The desired goal of the inquiry was to provide in-depth exploration and analysis; therefore, a qualitative design bests suited the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Qualitative studies that ask open-ended questions have greater capacity than other study designs to provide insight and rich phenomenological data about meditation-related experiences of community college students (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen & Britton, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research may do more to increase the understanding of rarely studied groups. Englander (2012) underscores this idea and asserts that smaller, more in-depth inquiries are needed to fully understand phenomena that are not well understood.

I investigated the shared, lived experiences of a phenomenon, in this case meditation practice as experienced by community college students. A primary goal of the research study was to understand the shared experiences of respondents who experienced the phenomenon of meditation practice, while exploring the contextual elements that influenced these shared experiences. Therefore, Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized. Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher is credited with developing the philosophy of phenomenology as way to execute scientific study. Phenomenology according to Edmund Husserl (2014) is "the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses" (Patton, 2002, p. 105). Clark Moustakas'(1994) transcendental phenomenology, or oftentimes referred to as psychological phenomenology, was founded on a number of Husserl's phenomenological principals. Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology theoretical approach

links the noema, or sensory and the noesis, or psychical in intentional ways. According to Husserl (1900;1970) phenomenological inquiry starts with the noesis, or the perceiver, and leads to the perceived, or noema. The noesis "refers to the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging – all of which are embedded with meanings that are concealed and hidden from consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69). Gurwitsch (1967) described the noema below:

> The noema is not the real object but the phenomenon, not the tree but the appearance of the tree. The object that appears in perception varies in terms of when it is perceived, from what angle, with what background of experience, with what orientation of wishing, willing, or judging, always from the vantage point of a perceiving individual. (p. 128).

Gurwitsch's description of the noema is a foundational idea that will drive this study. The researcher is trying to capture the essence associated with the lived experiences of community college student meditators – with a particular focus placed on how they perceive the psychological aspects associated with meditation practice. Relative to the current study, noema is the psychological experience associated with meditation practice, and noesis is the community college meditator who experiences the psychological aspects associated with meditation practice. It is important to approach any examination of the subjective experiences of respondents with the understanding that a meditator's motivations, personal biases and contextual experiences contribute to the psychological experiences and shape the noema (Moustakas, 1994). To this end, the secondary research question, "What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students" is key in framing the research.

Moustakas (1994) proposes that the process of transcendental phenomenology inquiry begins with the concept of the epoche, or as often referred to as bracketing. Epoche is a Greek word meaning to stay away or abstain (Moustakas, 1994). According to Husserl (2012), the epoche is the freedom from suppositions. Emanating from the work of Husserl (1931), the

epoche allows for the emergence of a fresh perspective on the phenomenon under examination. The epoche requires the investigator to refrain from valuation and judgment (Moustakas, 1994). Essentially, the researcher must set aside their own experiences in order to capture the essence of what the respondents are subjectively experiencing (Balaban, 2002).

Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology places a focus on the rich descriptions of participants and less of an emphasis on the interpretations of the researcher. Utilizing the epoche is the first step ensuring that the focus of the research remains on the subjective descriptions shared by respondents. An additional layer embedded in Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology to ensure that the essence of the lived experiences of respondents is captured is transcendental-phenomenological reduction (1994). Once the epoche is addressed, the next essential process involves transcendental-phenomenological reduction, a process that compels the researcher to consider experience "in its singularity, in and for itself" (Moustakas, 1994. p. 34).

Once the researcher describes their own experiences with the phenomenon through the epoche process, the next step involves identifying significant statements gleaned from the respondents. The significant statements are then clustered into meaning units and themes (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Through the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction, textural descriptions of the experiences of the respondents', and a combination of the textural and structural description are synthesized in order to convey an overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). A fundamental component of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology is captured by this statement: "From this process a structural description of the essences of the experience is derived, presenting a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). Structural descriptions create a better

understanding of what conditions influence subjective experience (Moustakas, 1994), and in the case of the current study, the research utilized the structural descriptions to generate a better understanding of how the contextual elements influence psychological experiences associated with meditation practice. Understanding what precipitates the psychological experiences of community college students during their meditative journeys is paramount to this study.

Considering meditation practices are very personal, inward experiences, experiences that are influenced by many contextual elements, Moustakas' phenomenological approach was deemed the most appropriate method of inquiry. Lutz and colleagues (2015), academics who have engaged in meditation research, assert that utilizing a phenomenological approach for meditation-focused inquiry is an optimal choice. Awasthi (2013) proclaims that a return to in-depth, first-person, phenomenological accounts is an ideal method in understanding the meditative process and stages of development associated with meditative experience that are still not well understood.

Guiding Research Questions

As discussed in Chapter 1, the guiding research questions provided direction while investigating the experiences of community college students who have participated in meditation practice, with the ultimate goal of understanding more clearly the lived and shared experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation. Therefore, the overarching research question was: What are the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation? The following secondary questions were utilized as well: What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices? What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students? The secondary questions offered the researcher a way to more deeply investigate and

understand the shared, lived experiences of the respondents as it relates to particular aspects of their psychological experiences associated with meditation practice.

Respondent Selection Strategies

Phenomenological research methods require that the characteristics of participants be varied (van Manen, 1990). Thus, the community college student population was an ideal respondent pool for this study as they represent a variety of characteristics – age, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, etc. The research study explored in depth, a very complex phenomenon: the shared, lived experiences of community college student meditators. The depth of inquiry needed to engage in such a study requires a focus of time and energy on an individual's lived experiences, allowing for rich description to unfold (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2013) suggests that a respondent group consisting of 8 to 10 individuals is an ideal sample size for transcendental phenomenology research, allowing for the collection of quality, rich data. Along these lines, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) assert that smaller sample sizes are more likely to offer opportunities for nuanced and detailed accounts on respondent experiences with a phenomenon.

Purposeful and criterion sampling was utilized for respondent recruitment. The study aimed to understand the experiences of a specific group of individuals, community college students, who experienced a shared phenomenon, in this case meditation practice. Thus, certain criteria needed be established to identify and recruit respondents. Criterion sampling, a method that ensures respondents meet predetermined criteria (Patton, 2002), was utilized to ensure the appropriate selection of respondents. The criteria for respondent selection was: (1) they are current or former community college students and (2) they practiced meditation during their time

as community college students. The goal was to identify and interview 7-10 northern California community college students who fit the above criteria.

Purposeful sampling is a method that directs the researcher in selecting respondents for study who are "information rich and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, in addition to criterion sampling, purposeful sampling was utilized as it was an appropriate and necessary respondent selection strategy for the study, considering the ultimate goal of the research was to understand the phenomenon of meditation experienced by community college students. Purposeful sampling has often been referred to as judgment sampling (Patton, 2002). "In judgment sampling, you decide the purpose you want informants (or communities) to serve, and you go out and find some" (Bernard, 2000, p. 176). In the case of the current study, community college students who have engaged in meditation practice were the desired respondents as they were able to provide insight into the phenomenon under investigation from a first-person perspective.

Respondents were recruited from a northern California community college. Utilizing the purposeful sampling approach, the researcher focused their search by identifying students who have participated in campus-based meditation related workshops, programs and/or courses. To this end, colleagues and faculty, who directly work with students in the above capacities were contacted and asked to assist the researcher in recruiting respondents. Additionally, the researcher utilized their own network that included community college students who have participated in mindfulness and meditation workshops, as well as courses focused mindfulness and meditation. Emails with information regarding the study, including the information letter (Appendix A) as an email attachment, were sent out to colleagues who forwarded the recruitment email to potential student respondents. I also sent recruitment emails out to twelve students who

had participated in mindfulness/meditation workshops and/or courses with the information letter attached. Ten students showed initial interest in participating in the study. Eight students out of the initial ten who expressed interest committed to participating in the study. The eight respondents were provided with a consent form (see Appendix B) via email.

Data Collection Procedures

Crossley (2000) suggests that information regarding certain events occurring in the lives of individuals and the actions taken by individuals in response to such experiences is best captured through interviews. Semi-structured, open-ended questions effectively elicit respondents' responses to lived experiences, in narrative form (Crossley, 2000; Creswell, 2013), therefore, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questioning were utilized to collect data. The interview protocols were developed aligning with Patton's (2002) standardized open-ended interview model of inquiry. More details on the interview protocols are to follow.

The coordination of scheduling for interviews was conducted through email correspondence. Ultimately, eight respondents participated in interviews. The instruments used for data collection were standardized open-ended interview guides as proposed by Patton (2002), consisting of two sets of interview protocols (Appendices D and E). Guiding probes are an essential characteristic of Patton's interview process (Patton, 2002). Patton's approach is guided by the following foundational principles. One, the exact instrument utilized for collecting data is available for inspection by those who access the results of the research. Two, Patton's interview guide model minimizes the chances of variation among interviewers. Third, interviews can be conducted in an efficient manner. Lastly, data analysis is streamlined allowing for the easy access and comparison of responses (Patton, 2002). The initial interview protocol consists of preliminary, open-ended questions while allowing for appropriate probing questions to be

utilized as necessary. The second set of interview questions (interview protocol two), consists of questions that led to deeper inquiry into the meditation practice experiences of the respondents.

Originally, the intent was to interview each respondent two times, and scheduling a third interview if necessary. The rationale behind scheduling two interviews, while utilizing two sets of interview protocol questions, was based on a number of factors associated with psychological phenomenology research. The initial interview protocol (Appendix D) was developed for utilization during the first interviews, allowing for rapport building and initial exploration of the research questions guiding the study. Building rapport with respondents is critical when conducting psychological phenomenology research (Moustakas, 1994; Rogers, 1961), and the first interview theoretically would allow for a level of necessary trust to be established. The second interview protocol (Appendix E) framed the inquiry toward exploring respondent experiences in terms of the conditions, situations, and context (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research requires deep inquiry that emanates from the lived experiences of interviewees (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers must deduce experiential meaning of a phenomenon, as it is distinctly lived – meaning that is complex, creative and rich with description (Finlay, 2009). Such a process takes time, thus the scheduling of two interviews appeared to align with best practice.

During the first interview respondents were asked an initial, broad, open-ended question to create space for the respondents to share their lived experience and to ensure that the "priori of the interpersonal context and the interaction always precede the type of questions asked" (Englander, 2012, p. 58). "Please tell me about your meditation practice" initiated a conversation that aligned with the goal of psychological phenomenological research – collecting "raw data that is descriptive, as in a naïve description provided by the participant" (Englander,

2012, p. 61). Utilizing the probing method, “tell me more about. . .” was a useful tool along with utilizing guiding prompts/questions to ensure rich descriptions of the respondent’s experiences with meditation were revealed (Moustakas, 1994, Patton, 2002).

As stated earlier, eight individuals were interviewed. Respondents were interviewed through the Zoom meeting online platform due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes. Four out of the eight respondents were interviewed once, as we were able to get through both interview protocols during one, 90-minute interview session. The other four respondents required an additional follow-up interview to address all the interview questions (protocols one and two), therefore; participated in two interviews. Three of the respondents also followed up through email to share additional data and clarify questions that arose during the Zoom interviews. The Zoom interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature. Additionally, the conversations were recording using the voice recorder application on a Google Pixel 3 XL cell phone as a backup to capture the audio interaction during interviews.

As previously stated, respondents participating in transcendental phenomenological research “are asked two broad, general questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). The interview protocols align with this foundational element of phenomenological research. Phenomenological research is not designed to test a hypothesis or gather answers to questions; the goal of such inquiry is to ask participants to reconstruct their lived experiences and explore the meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, it is critical that the phenomenological researcher refrains from the overreliance on preset questions to which the interviewer wants answers for, or about which they want to gather data (Seidman,

2013). Englander (2012) emphasizes that it is important for the psychological phenomenological researcher to guide the respondents rather than *lead* them during the interviewing process. Therefore, the interview should remain as semi-structured as possible (Giorgi, 2009). Verbal and non-verbal probes were utilized to clarify, interpret, and keep the conversations on topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although phenomenological research methodology embodies a non-linear, organically evolving nature to inquiry, in-depth interviews should begin with a basic guide to generate focus on the research topic and reconstruct the experience (Creswell, 2013; Vagle, 2016). Thus, both interview protocols reflect the interplay between allowing respondents to share their lived experiences stemming from meditation practice while mitigating any undue influence guiding questions might precipitate, and the possibility that some structure might be needed in order to establish as well as maintain focus on the purpose of the research. Follow-up questions were generated based how the interviews unfolded - what the participants were saying, while adhering to the fidelity of unstructured interviews that should be dialogic, open, and conversational (Vagle, 2016). Patton's standardized open-ended interview model allowed for an interplay between open organic dialogue and structure as needed (Patton, 2002).

Aligning with Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology approach, the interview protocols were devised to elicit descriptive evidence that addresses the overarching RQ: *What are the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation?* While also addressing the secondary RQs. RQ 1: *What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices?* RQ 2: *What contexts or situations influence the experiences of community college students who practice meditation?*

Data Analysis Procedures

Once interview data were collected, I then watched respondent recorded interviews to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed text captured by the Zoom recording feature. It was necessary to make corrections to the transcriptions generated by Zoom, as there were inaccuracies between what the respondents shared, and what was captured by the automatic transcription feature. Once the accuracy of the recorded transcription was addressed manually, I had verbatim transcriptions of all of the interviews captured using Microsoft Word documents. The data was stored on a password-protected personal laptop, ensuring all respondent data remains confidential.

The data analysis process utilized to capture the lived experience of individuals who have practiced meditation consisted of the following sequential steps that align with transcendental phenomenological research according to Moustakas (1994): (a) the epoche or bracketing, (b) horizonalization, (c) clustering the horizons into themes, (d) organizing the horizons and themes into a coherent textural and structural description of the phenomenon, and (e) establishing the essential invariant structure (or essence). How I went about incorporating the above elements of transcendental phenomenology data analysis during the research project is described in the subsequent paragraphs.

The first, and critical step in Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology research process involves the epoche, or bracketing. Investigators conducting transcendental phenomenology research are more concerned with descriptions of the experiences of respondents, therefore; bracketing is a safeguard against researcher interpretation during the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2013).

> The Epoche is a way of looking and being, an unfettered stance. Whatever or whoever appears in our consciousness is approached with an openness, seeing just what is there

> and allowing what is there to linger. This is a difficult task and requires that we allow a phenomenon or experience to be just what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85)

The epoche process was critically important for this particular study, as I am a long-time meditator, and I recognize my proponent stance in support of mindfulness and meditation. Intentionally bracketing myself out of the study was necessary, and allowed me to focus on the descriptions of the respondents as they shared their experiences related to meditation practice. I utilized meditation as a tool to ground and center myself during the data collection and analysis process. Oftentimes I meditated before interviews, allowing me to create a mental space that aligns with Moustakas' framework as he suggests investigators "set aside prejudgments, biases, and perceived ideas about things (Moustakas, 1994, p.85).

I proceeded to the second step of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology data analysis procedure – horizonalization. Utilizing horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994), I highlighted significant statements made by respondents as I read through the transcripts. Significant statements in transcendental phenomenology data analysis include sentences or quotes that provide understanding of how respondents experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas's (1994) framework requires the researcher to list every expression relevant to the experience, and then to proceed to the step of reduction and elimination. The process of reduction and elimination leads to the determination of invariant constituents – horizons that are relevant to the phenomenon, that can be labeled and are not repetitive, vague or overlapping.

During this phase of data analysis, I tested each of the respondent's expressions for two requirements: (1) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient to understand the phenomenon and (2) is it possible to abstract and label it? Aligning with Moustakas's (1994) data analysis framework, statements not meeting the aforementioned

requirements were eliminated. Furthermore, overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions were removed. The remaining expressions are the horizons that reflect invariant constituents of the meditation experiences as described by the respondents.

Once the invariant constituents were identified through the horizonalization process, they were clustered and themed. Labels were created to identify themes that consisted of related significant statements. The clustered and labeled constituents were the core themes of the respondents' experiences associated with their meditation practices (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing the relevant invariant constituents and themes, I constructed individual textural descriptions of each respondent's experience. Verbatim examples from the transcribed interview were included to capture the textural descriptions associated with each respondent and are included in the results section of the dissertation. Developing coherent textural descriptions of the phenomenon from the horizons and themes allows the researcher to define *what* of the phenomenon, in this case the phenomenon of meditation practice. According to Creswell (2013), textural descriptions are the defining characteristics of a phenomenon.

Next, I constructed an individual structural description for each respondent based on the individual textural descriptions and through the process of imaginative variation. Structural descriptions represent the *how* of the lived experiences of respondents – how they experienced the phenomenon in terms of the conditions, situations or context (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931), described imaginative variation as the "free play of fancy." According to Moustakas (1994), the role of imaginative variation is to seek possible meanings through the process of imagination while approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives. The descriptions of how contexts and settings influenced how respondents experienced their meditation practices were constructed and are presented in Chapter Four.

Finally, once the structural and textural descriptions were fully developed, I created a composite description that reveals the essence of the phenomenon I was investigating, meditation practice as experienced by community college students. Direct quotes provided by respondents that represent the phenomenon of persistence were analyzed, allowing for rich descriptions of the experiences (Creswell, 2013). Idiographic focus, involving emphasis placed on unique, individual experiential perception, of the individuals who experience a phenomenon, while simultaneously addressing claims made for the group as a whole, is a critical aspect of transcendental phenomenological research (Smith, et al. 2009), and this step was done with intentionality. The essential, invariant structure or essence, of the meditation practice experiences of community college students was created, reflecting an underlying structure of the experience. The underlying structure captures the shared, lived experiences of individuals who experience the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The essence of the phenomenon of meditation practice as experienced by community college students is also presented in Chapter Four.

Role of the Researcher

As a practitioner as well as teacher of mindfulness and meditation for several years now, the researcher must be mindful about the judgments, biases and assumptions they have about contemplative practice as they embark on this research study (van Manen, 1990). In order to ensure that one separates their priori knowledge from the experiential nature of the current study, it will be critical for the researcher to bracket themself out of the study, a common practice in phenomenological research, also referred to as the *epoche* process (Patton, 2002). To bracket oneself out of the research one discusses personal experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This does not necessarily require the researcher to remove themself from the research

completely as van Manen (1990) and Giorgi (2009) suggest, however; bracketing will compel the researcher to cultivate awareness and suspend judgement as much as possible while practicing the epoche.

> The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much. Or, more accurately, the problem is that our "common sense" pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question. (van Manen, 1990, p. 46)

Researcher Positionality

The respondents' experiences as participants in the study were influenced by sociocultural contexts in concert with how the researcher's sociocultural background and educational philosophies influenced their approaches as a researcher. "There's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at" (Hall, 1990, p. 18). Utilizing the epoche concept, I bracketed myself out of the research to the greatest extent possible. My previous experiences as a practitioner and teacher of mindfulness and meditation required an un acute level of self-awareness to ensure I recognized when my subjective experiences influenced how I conducted the research project, especially during the data collection and analysis stages. I am a strong believer, if you will, of the transformative nature of meditation, and Husserl's (2012) epoche process helped maintain the fidelity of respondent narratives.

Considering I am a long-time meditator, academic with a psychology background and have taught students in a variety of settings and capacities, I am influenced personally and professionally by three educational/philosophical perspectives – experientialism, intellectual traditionalism, and social behaviorism. John Dewey theorized that learning should be sourced from each learner's experience, rather than organized outside of the learner. Dewey's view of

education held that pedagogy should be an interplay between the psychological and logical – that each of these approaches could illuminate the other (Schubert, 1996). The Hawaiian phrase Ma Ka Hana Ka ʻIke translates into "insight through experience." I believe that deep learning constitutes experiential elements marked by logical and psychological development, as Dewey proposed. Meditation practice is experiential in nature, thus, a major motivating factor in why this study is being conducted. David Kolb stated, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Kolb's assertion aligns with my professional orientation as an educator, as well as researcher. Meditation can be a transformational experience, and therefore, this study was influenced by my experientialist lens.

Although, as an experientialist I believe learners should utilize intuition and self-knowledge during the developmental process, I also believe learning from experienced teachers is a critical component to learning – especially as it pertains to developing a meditation practice. Such a perspective was validated by the respondent narratives expressing how critically important participating in formal meditation training, taught by a competent instructor was in developing a meditation practice. Therefore, I see value in the intellectual traditionalist perspective. Intellectual traditionalists assert that "The great works are the best expressions of human insight, understanding, and wisdom, and the disciplines are the best organizations of knowledge as created by experts in each field" (Schubert, 1996, p. 16). As an educator, I believe context matters in relation to what curriculum is taught and how it is delivered. Therefore, I also consider myself to be a social behaviorist. The integration of experientialism, intellectual traditionalism and social behaviorism, undoubtedly will influence how the research project is approached; therefore, this awareness will be of value during the study to ensure the highest probability of objectivism.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative researchers employ a series of validation strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Validation measures provide a framework for qualitative researchers to ensure the accuracy of their studies to the best of one's ability. Creswell and Miller (2000) outline strategies that may serve qualitative researchers well as they aim to validate their research. For this study, I utilized the following three strategies as proposed by Creswell and Miller: (1) clarifying researcher bias; (2) peer review, or debriefing; and (3) member checking.

Critical to all qualitative research endeavors is the matter of clarifying researcher bias from the outset of a research project (Creswell, 2013). The researcher's position, and any biases/assumptions that potentially impact the inquiry must be presented to readers of the study. Clarifying researcher bias was explored in the *role of the researcher* and *researcher positionality* sections of the dissertation.

Additionally, I utilized the technique of peer review, oftentimes defined as debriefing, throughout the research project. The technique of peer review was utilized in developing an interview protocol. Before conducting interviews, the reliability of the interview protocols must be addressed (Creswell, 2013). Experts in the field of qualitative research emphasize the importance of pilot testing interview questions and procedures (Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2020 & Sampson, 2004). Sampson (2004) asserts that the pilot test is critically important in terms of refining and developing research instruments, assessing the degrees of observer bias, framing questions and adapting researcher procedures.

To address the issues of reliability in terms of instrumentation and procedures for the current study, pilot testing of the two interview protocols was executed. Two colleagues who

practice meditation regularly were interviewed using the current protocols to ensure the questions were appropriate and suit the needs of the proposed research goals. The volunteers who pilot-tested the interview protocols were asked to provide feedback on both the content and structure of the interview protocol. Both interviews lasted a little over an hour. One of the pilot-test volunteers shared that some of the questions were redundant, and the current protocols reflect changes made based on this feedback. According to the interview protocol pilot-testers, the questions were easy to understand. Furthermore, the volunteers indicated in their comments to me that the interview protocols and structure created the conditions necessary to freely and authentically express themselves. Based on the pilot testing process, the interview protocols were deemed to be suitable instruments for the purpose of exploring the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation.

Member checking entails the process of a researcher soliciting respondent's feedback regarding the credibility of what was captured during the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checking to be the most important tool in ensuring the credibility of qualitative research. Aligning with this guidance, respondents were provided with their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data. Along these lines member checking allowed the respondents to reflect on their narratives and provided them with the space to confirm the authenticity of their stories.

Assumptions

The assumptions that will be inherent in the study are that the respondents are all community college students who have engaged in meditation practice. It is assumed that respondents are truthful when participating in interviews.

Summary

Chapter 3 mapped out the methodological elements of the research study. The research project adhered to a qualitative, transcendental phenomenology approach collecting data utilizing one-to-one interviews consisting of open-ended questions. The overarching question of this study was: What are the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation? Respondents were selected using a combination of criterion and purposeful sampling strategies. Eight individuals were interviewed, some participated in a single interview, while others were interviewed twice. The data was collected through the Zoom recording application. I transcribed the data for all interviews, and the entirety of the data was stored on a password protected laptop. Data analysis involved horizontalization, the development of clusters of meaning, which included textural as well as structural descriptions. The essence of the phenomenon was presented utilizing a composite description that was developed from the structural and textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher's role, positionality and assumptions were discussed.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to investigate the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation utilizing Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry. In this chapter the results from the interviews facilitated with the eight respondents is presented. The following secondary questions framed the research: (1) What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices? (2) What contexts or situations influence the meditation experiences of community college students? At the conclusion of the horizonalization phase of data analysis, respondent significant statements generated four overarching clusters of meaning, presented here as themes. The four themes are (1) psychological adversity, (2) elements of meditation practice, (3) outcomes associated with meditation practice and (4) challenges associated with meditation practice. Within these larger themes, subthemes capture the textural and structural aspects of the experience. The themes as wells as subthemes are presented in subsequent sections, and textural as well as structural descriptions utilizing direct quotes from respondents provide evidence reflecting such themes. A summary describing what the respondents experienced in terms of meditation practice (textural evidence), as well as the context in which meditation practice was experienced (structural), is provided. Finally, the essence of the phenomenon of inquiry, the meditation practice experiences of community college students, is described.

A brief description of each of the respondents is provided below to orient the reader to who participated in the study. Each of the respondents have practiced meditation while attending community college. Seven out of the eight respondents currently meditate, while the respondent who had not been practicing at the time of their interview expressed a strong desire to reestablish

their meditation practice. Five of the eight respondents are current California community college students, and the remaining three have attended California community colleges in the recent past. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

Respondent Profiles

Charlie

Charlie is a 46-year-old, White, self-identified male who considers himself a Christian. He has no children, currently does not have a partner and lives alone. Charlie last attended a California community college during the spring 2020 semester. He is taking some time off from school, as the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has proved difficult for him. He is an Environmental Science major and plans to re-enroll in school once learning returns to the face-to-face modality. According to Charlie, he has difficulty focusing while completing academic tasks. Charlie also struggled with severe stress and anxiety during his time as a community college student due to some major life changes.

Forrest

Forrest is 48 years old and identifies as male. He identified as Puerto Rican and White, and currently is a Psychology major at a community college in northern California. His long-term goals are to receive his teaching credentials so that he can become an elementary school teacher. Forrest has a 19-year-old son and identifies as a Christian, although he does align with Native American spiritual practices. Forrest has a history of mental health challenges and is recovering from addiction due to his past substance abuse experiences.

James

James is 26 years old, and last attended a California community college in 2020 during which he was studying to be a registered nurse (RN). He identifies as a White male and is a

practicing Catholic. James is currently attending a registered nursing program at a university in northern California. Managing stress and anger are areas James would like to improve upon.

Krystal

Krystal is 24 years old, and last attended a California community college in 2020. She identifies as being a bi-racial, Black and White, female. She currently is a Psychology major at a University of California university. Krystal is currently single, lives with her dog and does not subscribe to a particular religion. She is not very close to her parents, however; she does have a close relationship with her grandfather. Krystal struggles with moderate anxiety and has utilized therapy to work through her challenges associated with anxiety. She lost her home to the wildfire that devastated the town of Paradise, California in 2018. Krystal is working on discovering who she is and learning how to be independent – she ended a relationship a few years ago and is learning how to be okay with being "alone."

Macy

Macy is a 26-year-old White female who currently attends a northern California community college. She is a nursing major who is pursuing a career in labor and delivery nursing. She has a partner, lives with roommates and considers herself to be agnostic. Macy struggles with moderate stress and anxiety, primarily due to family related challenges, as well as the stress associated with the college academic workload.

Peyton

Peyton is a 20-year-old transgender male who identifies as White. They currently attend a northern California community college and are studying funeral services education. Peyton has a partner, and considers themself to be an atheist, however, Peyton also describes themselves as being a secular Buddhist. Peyton struggles with general stress and anxiety. Their journey as a

transgender person has led to stress, anxiety as well as confidence issues. However, they are becoming more comfortable with who they are as time moves on.

Tracy

Tracy is a 61-year-old Native American (Sioux, Blackfoot) and Black female who currently attends a northern California community college. She is married and has stepchildren. Her goal is to obtain a medical office administration certificate, and to reenter the work force working for a medical office. Tracy's religious affiliation is Episcopalian/Protestant. Tracy has history of anxiety and depression. She also struggles with ADHD.

Yasmeen

Yasmeen is a 40-year-old immigrant from Mexico who identifies as female. She is married with 3 male children, ages 14, 19 and 20. Yasmeen currently attends a northern California community college and is pursuing a career either as an occupational therapist, or occupational therapy assistant. Yasmeen has a history of trauma and struggles with depression as well as anxiety. She also experiences academic challenges due to ADHD. Yasmeen actively participates in therapy to work through her psychological challenges.

Origin of Meditation Practice

The following section provides insight into how the respondents discovered meditation practice. Four of the respondents, Charlie, Krystal, Tracy and Yasmeen began their meditation practice through a formal meditation course/workshop taught on their community college campus. James was introduced to meditation practice through a community-based yoga class. Macy shared that her father, introduced her to the concept of contemplative practice as a child, however; there was no formal training involved through this experience. She was later introduced to meditation more formally during a course on the psychology of meditation, while

attending a university prior to her time at community college. Forrest was introduced to meditation by family and friends throughout the years. Peyton discovered meditation through informal exposure, independent investigation and curiosity, leading them to increase their knowledge about meditation practice through the digital resources of YouTube and TEDTalks, as well as through reading materials associated with Buddhist psychology.

The following are the overarching themes shared amongst all respondents that emerged during data analysis. Subthemes emerged within the context of the larger clusters of meanings. These subthemes are discussed in subsequent sections.

Clusters of Meaning/Themes

- Psychological Adversity
- Elements of Meditation Practice
- Outcomes Associated with Meditation Practice
- Challenges Associated with Meditation Practice

Theme: Psychological Adversity

All eight of the respondents were experiencing psychological health challenges as community college student meditators. In addition to the psychological stress inherent in the lives of the respondents, in some cases the students were also experiencing adversity in terms of physical health, relationships, housing and food insecurity and issues related to racial, cultural and/or sexual identity oppression. The focus of this section, however, is on psychological adversity, which is fundamentally influenced heavily by the aforementioned factors. It is important to note, many of these psychology struggles are ongoing challenges, to some degree, for all of the respondents. Each of the respondents experienced moderate to extremes levels of stress and anxiety during their time as a community college student. All eight of the respondents

were navigating challenging relationships during their community college meditation practice experiences – romantic partnerships, family, friends and/or roommate issues. In some cases, respondents were experiencing additional mental health challenges associated with depression, sleep issues, substance abuse, ADHD and/or loneliness.

Understanding the psychological, physical, interpersonal and environmental challenges the respondents were negotiating during their time as community college meditators is a critical aspect of this investigation, as it aligns with Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology framework for inquiry that requires the researcher to develop a description of how respondents experience a phenomenon, the structural aspects, in terms of the conditions, situations or contexts present in the lives of the respondents (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the theme of adversity is being presented as a composite of structural descriptions, which are presented below, direct quotes from respondents are included as evidence.

Forrest described his personal struggles associated with mental health, sleep and past substance abuse: "So, so for me I have always had trouble with sleeping, and I had also been on psychotropic medication for most of my life." While on vacation with his son, Forrest also explained how addiction has shaped his life while discussing how meditation practice created more awareness about how substance abuse affected his mental experiences. In fact, Forrest explained that meditation led to the perception that using drugs of any kind, was in his words "cheating." Forrest credits his meditation practice with not only shedding light on his issues with addiction, but it also increased his motivation to remain sober. He explained:

> We went to a restaurant. They were like, oh, you don't have to order these virgin ones, you know, you can drink. We were like, why did you say that (he chuckled)? So anyway, so I had a drink with the family and I had a couple sips. I went upstairs to grab something and I came back and I was like, I could just feel just like the slightest thought, that I would have probably never would have thought before, but I was like this is cheating too. I'm like, that's what I thought (smiles and laughts). I'm like this isn't running, this isn't

> meditation, that this isn't sitting in the silence, and I knew then I was like, oh, okay then, I do have a problem with alcohol. I don't, I don't want to. It's not an experience that I want to have. So, and also being an addict, I also recognize that alcohol is something that that could be considered a drug as well.

Krystal shared, "I'm a very anxious person. I struggle with being anxious quite a bit, stressful scenarios that are very small turn into really big things." When Charlie was asked what life was like outside of school while he was attending community college, he explained that he had recently moved to northern California, leaving a high paying job to take care of his dying father. He and his father did not have a good relationship, so that, in addition to struggling financially created a great deal of psychological stress reflected by this statement, "So that was affecting what was going on at school and things like that. There was an enormous amount of anxiety and stress going on."

Macy shared that she has struggled with anxiety for a few years now, and eventually began meeting with a therapist to work through her psychological struggles. She has been recently coping with a great deal of stress and anxiety related to school as a current community college student (taking difficulty course required for entry into the nursing program) and is also dealing with the fact that her father, whom she is very close with, is incarcerated. Macy is fighting for his freedom, working with an attorney to appeal his case, as she believes he is innocent for the crime he was convicted of. When asked how meditation makes her feel, she responded with the following, capturing the psychological and physical stress she has been negotiating during her time as a community college student:

> . . . and then having it come back up and then releasing stress, anxiety, worry, fear. And then keep that process going coming back up my legs to my knees to my pelvis you know to my chest my heart my head and just do that you know until I reached the top of my head and it's you know it's totally wild how I feel afterwards, compared to before and it just you know doesn't take much time but it totally sets me up for the rest of my day. . . I feel less weight and I feel my chest open up like I can take deeper breaths which kind of makes me feel less anxious.

Tracy expressed concerns related to her psychological health and described hardships connected to finances and relationships:

> . . .that one's easy, laziness, boredom or depression. So I'm thinking, I have a husband who's very ill, who has some challenges and having to deal with that. Not having a luxury of a lot funds or family, or close friends to help and not wanting to deal with that.

James explained that the COVID 19 pandemic was creating psychological stress while attending community college, and he decided to explore meditation as a response to the difficulties he was experiencing.

> That was kind of when it was once a week and then in March, when COVID became more prominent. That's when I started going about three times a week because I was having a difficult time adjusting, and I knew that the more that I would practice meditation it would make it easier, and that's how. . . it then became a lot easier.

In addition to expressing how she struggles with anxiety in general Krystal shared her personal story of experiencing psychological trauma during her time as a community college student. While attending community college she had lost her home in the Paradise, CA wildfire, known as the Camp Fire, in 2018. Krystal was also navigating a breakup with her partner while exploring meditation practice for the first time.

> I had just broken up with someone that I was with for, I think, like two years and I was kind of in a position where my adult life had only been spent with that person. I was living with that person, so I kind of felt like I didn't really understand myself, I think.
>
> I think that I definitely have taken my body for granted in the past and It has done these great things for me, like allowed me to graduate from Butte college. I graduated from college, the same year that my home in Paradise burned down. And that was a really stressful thing to do. I didn't like my last, I think it was like two weeks, we went back to school and everything was really weird and I got through that even though it was really weird. And I remember like I only had one pair of pants one shirt and one pair of shoes and socks. And I was still trying to show up to school and like do normal things, even though things were like very not normal. . .

Yasmeen opened up about her psychological struggles sharing that she has experienced "severe depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal thoughts." She also described her challenges in

terms of her day-to-day obligations in conjunction with here psychological distress that shape her experiences as a community college student.

> Of course, that I am a housewife, mom, have a part time job, am a student and help my dad and mom with their personal needs, but I think my health issues are like a setback. It could be that both things are related and one could be the trigger, but I am not sure. It is a complex thing.

Peyton described how the experience of being transgender has been a source of adversity:

> There's obviously been a lot of changes and I can't really go into everything here, but like, you know, first of all, I think you know this right, I'm transgender. Yeah so I came out as transgender that's been a whole thing, like when I first started meditating I hadn't come out anywhere, so that was a whole process. I had to come out and start transitioning medically, and that's a whole other topic.

Theme: Elements of Meditation Practice

Theme two captures the dynamic nature of meditation as a practice. Respondents described meditation practice as a variety of practices and processes. Therefore, to honor such a fascinating finding, I am framing meditation practice as a culmination of processes and differential yet connected parts. Such processes and various aspects are presented here in terms of subthemes. For example, the catalysts, or motivating factors that compel one to practice meditation is presented as an element of meditation practice, and thus, considered to be a subtheme.

The idea that meditation is dynamic in nature is unpacked through deeper analysis, generating evidence to include the types of meditation practices utilized, the frequency of practice, the setting, and other contextual factors. Mechanistic elements such as these, influence the meditation practice experiences of respondents, and are prime examples of the multidimensionality of meditation practice - meditation practice being multidimensional is an insightful subtheme associated with the theme of elements of meditation practice.

An additional aspect associated with the elements of meditation practice theme is the concept of practice supports. In other words, what are the conditions and/or resources that support the growth and maintenance of meditation practice according to respondents? The following sections present the subthemes related to elements of meditation practice. Direct quotes from respondents are included reflecting the subthemes.

Each of the respondents were internally and externally influenced to explore meditation practice. The respondents expressed that they were drawn to meditation practice as a result of the psychological challenges they were facing. Also, once they "tasted" meditation practice, the respondents became internally motivated to explore continued meditation practice. The external influences in the form of other people, courses and/or media influenced them to explore meditation as an ongoing practice and tool for psychological wellness.

Krystal provided an example of how she was both internally (emotional experiences) and externally (challenging relationship) influenced to explore meditation practice due to the difficult emotions resulting from the ending of a romantic relationship:

> I had just broken up with someone that I was with for, I think, like two years and I was kind of in a position where my adult life had only been spent with that person. I was living with that person, so I kind of felt like I didn't really understand myself, I think.So I think at that time I was really seeking out things that maybe felt like me, like things that I would do or things that I was interested in. I kind of was in a space where I was trying to figure out how to be okay with just being by myself. Um, and so it was probably exactly what I needed because I think it kind of just let me be okay with what was going on in my head, and let me feel like I was okay with not only being physically alone, but okay with the thought of it and okay with not liking it, if that makes sense. Like, I didn't like to be by myself all the time, but I was accepting of that reality. But it wasn't something that just came to me. So I had to work on it.

According to James, his yoga teacher (external influence) introduced him to meditation. James continued to explain that his yoga teacher inspired him to become more mindful and James experienced joy (internal influence) during his meditation experiences during yoga class:

> The reason I began meditating, I actually was a college student. I started taking yoga classes and had the fortunate pleasure, of having a yoga instructor that was very, how do I put this, he was was the one inspiring me to become more mindful. We would do mindful walking, we'd spend about half an hour just walking around the classroom. Focusing on breathing and we would then have us do assignments at home, where we would do mindful eating and mindful brushing of our teeth. So practices included using our non-dominant hand as opposed to our dominant hand and that was kind of when I really started to enjoy meditation and just the idea of taking yourself away from, I guess, in a way, being more in the present moment.

Tracy also shared how she was internally and externally influenced to explore mediation practice. She explained that her social worker, who acted as her mental health counselor in many ways, encouraged Tracy to explore self-care practices such as meditation to help her manage her emotions. Tracy enrolled in a meditation course being offered at the community college she attends, and the practices benefited her in the following ways reflecting the internal motivation to explore further meditation practice: “I came to realize how much I do not give myself loving kindness, and that I do not give myself a break. I have found that [meditation] has helped with refocusing and recentering.”

Technical aspects, a particular element of meditation practice, reflects a focus on the particular meditation techniques, including posture and the use of specific meditation anchors, as well as the frequency/timing of practice. As articulated in the literature review, meditation is an umbrella term for a variety of techniques, and the various meditation techniques are associated with different psychological and physiological experiences.

How often one meditates, as well as the time-of-day meditation takes place, are areas of meditation inquiry still being explored in terms of meditation practice timing, dosage effects and related outcomes. Another area of interest as it relates to meditation practice, is the concept of peak of practice. In other words, at what point were respondents meditating the most in terms of daily practice, and how much time were they spending meditating during individual sessions?

Peak of practice meditation experiences will be explored further. The table below outlines each of the respondent's meditation routines, including the practices that were incorporated into routine practice. It is important to note, that respondent's have explored additional meditation techniques throughout their meditation practice experiences as community college students, however; the practices listed within the table are the techniques respondents practiced routinely.

Table 1
Technical Aspects of Respondents' Meditation Practice

Respondent	Practice Schedule/Frequency	Time of Day and Duration	Meditation Techniques
Charlie	At least once a day, sometimes twice a day	Mornings most often, for 10-15 minutes Evenings occasionally (shorter duration, a couple of minutes)	Breath Awareness, Body Scan, Belly Breathing and Guided Imagery
Forrest	Daily, twice a day	Mornings for 20 minutes Evenings for 10 minutes	Gratitude Practice, Mindfulness Meditation Uses anchor word, "love"
James	Three times a week, M, W & F	Mornings typically for 10 minutes	Breath Awareness
Krystal	At least twice a week, maybe more Once a day	Mornings for 8-10 minutes	Breath Awareness, Body Scan and Gatha
Macy	5 days a week Twice a day	Mornings for 10-30 minutes Evenings waters backyard mindfully for 20-30 minutes (less structured)	Yoga, Breath Awareness, Gatha, Body Scan and Gratitude Practice
Peyton	At least 4 times a week Once a day	Morning generally, for 10 minutes Evenings for 10 minutes (if unable to meditate during the morning)	Breath Awareness, Body Awareness/Scan

(Table 1 Continued)

Tracy	5-7 days a week 2-3 times a day	Mornings for 20 minutes to 1 hour Mid-day (on occasion) for 20 minutes to 1 hour Evenings for 20 minutes to 1 hour	Body Scan, Belly Breathing and Walking Meditation
Yasmeen	5 days a week At least once a day, sometimes more often	During the day for 3 minutes (dynamic breathing) Evening practice most frequently for 10 minutes	Body Scan, Dynamic Breathing, Breath Awareness and Guided Imagery

At the onset of their practice, meditation was embedded into six of the eight respondent's daily routines. Each respondent meditated at least once a day, with sessions lasting at least ten minutes. According to four of the respondents, daily and consistent practice was a product of their participation in a formal course, and connection to peers who also meditated. As time went on, practice became more sporadic for some, while others have implemented meditation practice as a long-term routine. Decline in practice for half of the respondents was directly associated with the absence of a formal meditation course, community of meditators and teacher. Essentially, half of the respondents tapered off in terms of meditation practice after their participation in a formal meditation course, over time. Therefore, it appears that peak of practice is associated with active participation in a formal meditation course that includes a community of meditators and an experienced teacher. Also, depending on one's life circumstances, meditation practice is associated with inconsistency. The influence of formal training, including meditation courses and workshops, as well as meditation communities on the meditation practice experiences of the respondents is further explored in a subsequent section.

Tracy, Forrest, Macy and Peyton were practicing meditation regularly when the study began. The other four respondents were not currently meditating regularly at the time the of the study. Peyton had taken a break for a few months due to a difficult living situation, but picked practice back up about a month before this study was conducted. Tracy, Forrest, Macy and Peyton also make intentional efforts to meditate at least twice a day, and in Tracy's case, three times a day. Although he was not meditating at the time the study began, Charlie reported that he was meditating twice a day when meditation was part of his daily routine. Forrest and Macy currently meditate two times daily consistently. Peyton meditates once a day, typically in the mornings, however; they will meditate in the evenings if they skip morning practice. Tracy's goal is to meditate 2-3 times a day, however; this schedule is not consistent from week to week.

An important note and interesting development during the course of this study, was the fact that three of the respondents, James, Charlie, and Yasmeen, reestablished meditation practice and credited their participation in the study with mediation practice reincorporation. As the study went on, seven of the eight respondents were consistently incorporating meditation practice into their lives, and expressed the intention to continue practice into the foreseeable future. Crystal was actively practicing mindfulness during her daily activities, such as mindful nature hikes, however; she was not engaging in formal meditation practice. Although Crystal wasn't meditating during the course of the study, she did express a strong desire to reinstate her formal meditation practice in the future.

In terms of the time-of-day respondents prefer to meditate, three out of the eight meditators practiced meditation during the morning most often. Five of the respondents made real efforts to meditate more than once a day. Four respondents expressed that their ideal meditation practice consisted of meditating once in the morning, and once at night. However,

only Macy and Forrest meditate consistently in the mornings and evenings daily, with some exceptions. As to why respondents preferred to meditate during certain times of the day, responses varied. Five of the respondents articulated that meditating in the mornings helped them start their days off in more positive ways. Those who meditated during the evenings reported that evening mediation practice helps them wind down from busy days, and calm their minds, while others stated evening meditations help with sleep. Others shared that their meditation schedule is often dictated by contextual factors such as, academic tasks, work schedule, family obligations as well as their psychological and physical states from day to day.

Macy explained that her morning meditation is more prescribed and aligns with a more a structured approach, while her evening meditation involves watering her garden every evening.

> I would say, I try to [meditate] five days a week, you know, during the week, especially when I'm really busy, and it kind of for me is broken up into different chunks so in the morning I, you know, I think of my meditation as starting like pretty much the second that I wake up, so I have a routine and so I'm just being mindful of everything that I'm doing with my routine.

Macy went on to explain how her mindful activities, alluded to above, transition into formal breath awareness meditation practice and yoga. Her moment-to-moment experiences during this practice are described in further detail in later sections. Macy's next account below describes her evening meditation practice:

> So typically, my meditation is in the mornings. However, I typically go outside in my garden every evening and water everything out there. I find that very meditative, and it is something I look forward to every single day, almost more than my morning routine. . I don't have a set routine or anything in particular that I think about or do when I'm watering. . .

Charlie described how his meditation practice became part of his routine during the initial stages of practice:

> Sure, back then, especially during the class, I was [meditating] at least once a day, sometimes twice. If I meditated twice, one of them would be a longer meditation 15

> minutes which I would consider long back then, and then, if I did a second one, it would be short, like a minute.

Forrest described his beginning meditation practice as routine and disciplined effort:

> Yeah, it was, very mechanical. For me it was a practice for doing something even when I didn't want to do it. It was not comfortable for me to do, but it also had to be at the same time for me and needed to be at the same time every day. And I, and I would do it, whether I wanted to or not.

According to Peyton, they have been actively trying to establish a meditation practice routine:

> And I would say that's something I'm trying to get better at, is doing it in the morning before I really get going on anything else, because it is best for me to meditate before I start reading or working on a project or going to work or something. And then I would just say playing into that timing issue, like if I work in the morning, if I work at 8am, and I stay up to late, I want to wake up even earlier to meditate so I usually end up doing it in the evening after I get home and that just tends not to go as well, but it's still productive.

Krystal shared how her meditation practice became an important aspect of her weekly routine:

> I probably meditated, I can guarantee that it was at least twice a week, but it could have been more. Generally, I would meditate when I got up in the morning. It's like something that I would do before I started anything for my day. I would just kind of like wake up in the morning and just sit and try to be present in that moment, try to clear my mind if I could.

The next set of verbatim respondent responses reflect the important meditation experience element associated with the time of day one chooses to meditate. Both Charlie and James explained how their morning meditation provides them with a tool that creates conditions for a new, fresh start to each day. Charlie specifically shared the following:

> Well, I feel like I've always got a tool to prepare me for things, even your just your average plain day if you meditate in the morning, I believe it gives you a nice neutral base to start the day from. It kind of prevents me from maybe letting the previous day bleed into the following day, you know I kind of like to use it as the foundation of the day. I will meditate it in the evening now but it's usually, I like to do it in the morning, when I can. If I do an evening meditation it will be a shorter meditation usually. I just feel like it's a nice grounding experience for the day for each day. It starts you off on a on a nice neutral place.

Peyton shared that they prefer morning meditations and like Charlie and James, believe meditating before they start their day is good practice. Peyton also stated that their evening meditation, “tends not to go as well, but it’s still productive.” However; if Peyton does not have time in the morning, they will meditate in the evening,

> I would say just timing in the day, because a lot of the time you know, I don't wake up and immediately want to go meditate I usually want to go eat breakfast or something so oftentimes I'll end up putting it off. And I would say that's something I'm trying to get better at is doing it in the morning before I really get going on anything else, because it is best for me to meditate before I start reading or working on a project or going to work or something. And then I would just say playing into that timing issue, like if I work in the morning, if I work at 8am, I just stay up too late to really to want to wake up even earlier to meditate. So I usually end up doing it in the evening after I get home and that just tends not to go as well, but it's still productive.

Like Peyton, Forrest meditates in the evenings. His evening meditation practice is more regimented than Peyton’s. He did however, express a similar sentiment regarding his evening meditation experiences as did Peyton. For Franklin, evening meditation creates more aversion, and at some point during his meditation practice, he was concerned about getting enough sleep, leading him to question his evening meditation practice.

> At night I'm ready to sit down and I'm ready, ready to do that. Interestingly though at night, I want to skip that one all the time. That's the one that I, that seems that I always want to skip, and just get to the reading or just get to, you know, oh, you know, and thinking about other stuff or to get journaling. I journal in the morning and at night so then I finally go, okay well we're doing this, no matter what. And so, and I'll set the timer and I'm actually building back up to 10 minutes. I had stopped during the beginning of the semester, I was so tired at the end of the night and sort of worry about getting to sleep.

Yasmeen prefers meditating during the day to increase her energy and focus for completing academic tasks, and in the evenings, to improve her sleep quality. That said, she is exploring the idea of incorporating morning meditation in her weekly, if not daily routine.

> Before sleeping or resting I do the belly breathing exercise and guided imagery and the position of this is lying down. When I do the Gatha exercise my position is sitting. I meditate as a support to sleep. Also, to get energy and be focused to be able

> to work in my assignments. I do not meditate in the mornings, that is a goal I was considering today.

Tracy articulated how her meditation practice schedule is influenced by emerging psychological and physical needs that may arise throughout her week:

> And I do it once to twice a day if I'm feeling more stressed, or more tired. So generally, I try to get one in the morning or mid-morning and then one in the evening to help with sleep, that last anywhere from about 20 minutes to an hour. So that would be, I'd say. Five to seven days a week. It varies.

Meditation encompasses a variety of techniques, approaches and postures. Understanding how one meditates, is just as informative as to when one meditates. All eight respondents reported experimenting with different meditation techniques. The following table provides an overview of common meditation techniques, and how many of the respondents practiced such techniques at some point during their meditation practice.

Table 2
Meditation Techniques Practiced by Respondents

Types of Practices	**# Of Respondents who Utilized Practice**
Sitting	8
Lying Down	3
Breath Awareness/Breath as Anchor	8
Body Scan	6
Walking Meditation	6
Belly Breathing	6
Visualization/Guided Imagery	6
Labeling Thoughts/Emotions	6
Mindfulness	8
Gratitude	8
Gatha/Words	6
Metta/Compassion	3
Guided Meditation	6

Breath awareness meditation, involving the utilization of the breath as an anchor, was or still is a fundamental element associated with all eight of the respondents' meditation practices. Breath awareness is a critical aspect of Macy's meditation practice, and she described how she incorporates the breath as an anchor here:

> . . . And then you know I'll kind of do some exercises and stretches and then end with slow Śavāsana again and that's when I'll do some breathing exercises, where I'm envisioning you know, when I'm breathing in, I'm breathing in love, gratitude, strength, and confidence. I'm envisioning it going into my body and swirling around starting at my toes all the way down at my toes. And then having it come back up and then releasing stress, anxiety, and worry.

James explained how he primarily used the breath as an anchor when he began his meditation practice, and the breath continues to be a fundamental element of his meditation practice as reflected by his two accounts below:

> Mostly my meditation practice usually consisted of just breathing techniques. I took a lot of yoga classes and some of the things we focused on was just counting our breath, so I would just pretty much have a continual count of 1-2-3-4, and started doing some mantras of just telling myself breathing in, breathing out.

> So the last meditation that I did, it was about three to four weeks ago, probably before I left my hometown, like a couple days before then. I'd fallen out of practice, so I knew that I wasn't quite ready for a 10-minute meditation, so I only did a five-minute meditation but I was in my room, and I got out um, I have a blanket that I always sit on. I folded it up and I crossed my legs and I sat there with my hands on top of my knees and I set a timer for five minutes, knowing that five minutes would be perfect, for now. I just practiced a mantra, I practiced just saying I am here now, with each breath in, and each breath out, and did that for about five minutes, focusing on belly breathing, doing my best not to use my lungs. . .

While Charlie was describing how he utilized a variety of meditation techniques in the beginning stages of his meditation practice, he eluded to the fact that breath awareness meditation was his preferred method, "You can't really beat just the basic breath awareness one. . ."

Some other notable technical aspects of the respondents' meditation practice experiences are the utilization of gratitude expression and the incorporation of the gatha technique. Gathas

are essentially meditation poems, words that provide an anchor for one to rest their awareness on during meditation. Gratitude was a salient element of all eight of the respondent's meditation practices. As presented in the literature review, the development of gratitude is an adaptive psychological process.

Each of the respondents described their meditation practices in a way that highlights how dynamic and multidimensional their practices are/were as community college students. Meditation practice is not merely a single activity or rigid routine, although there are examples of how meditation practice was framed as consistent, routine practices in some cases. This is an important discovery, as it sheds light on how community college students define "meditation practice," as well as how they make meaning of such practices while incorporating into their lives as students in a variety of ways.

Peyton describe their meditation practice in a way that reflects the dynamic and multidimensional nature of their practice:

> At the moment I mainly meditate at least four times a week, you know I shoot for every day, but it doesn't always work with my schedule. I usually meditate in the morning, if I work early I do it in the evening. I usually meditate for 10 minutes at a time. Um, I have a little zafu and have been trying to improve my posture. And yeah, I usually do breath awareness, but sometimes I'll do more of a body awareness kind of thing. I've messed around with guided meditations, and sometimes they're nice. But I don't really do that daily or anything it's not a regular practice for me.

Yasmeen explained that she has utilized practices such as dynamic breathing (chicken breath), diaphragmatic breathing (belly breathing), breath awareness meditations and guided imagery. She has incorporated such practices at different times, finding each has utility for her in different ways. Here she described how dynamic breathing, also known to meditation students as the chicken breath, and guided imagery practice were both activities that she found helpful: "I was doing more of the chicken breath, and then there was a specific meditation to focus, and I'm

not sure if that was [guided] imagery? So that works. That works for me." The chicken breath is non-technical term used to describe dynamic breathing. Yasmeen also shared that she has utilized belly breathing, along with guided imagery, to help with managing stress and anxiety:

> Like last semester, when it was really tough, like if I was feeling overwhelmed with my chemistry class, I sometimes just noticed that, I just need some time to get more energy so I can be able to work, so I was also using guided imagery, I was using guided imagery and belly breathing.

Forrest described his dynamic meditation practice in terms of the variety of activities associated with his practice, as well as the timing of practice – morning and evening activities. Here he shared what his morning practice entails:

> On a daily basis I engage in 20 minutes in the morning. I begin my day very specifically with gratitude. I wake up in the morning and I drink about 50 ounces of water and then I move to my meditation room. I first begin by reading prayers that I've written out, things to get my cognition moving and my neuronal activity beginning and then I have lists of people that I say their name every morning and then I set my alarm for 20 minutes or my timer for 20 minutes and then I sit in silence. I sit in a chair for that period of time with a pillow on my back. In the morning, I use an anchor word. The word that I use is love. I'll practice holding that word and anytime my mind moves away I move back into that and that seems to offer a different kind of experience than when I use that word to call back gently. You know, some stories are things that I begin to tell myself. So at the end of the 20 minutes I give thanks to the experience and then I move into the next part of my day, which is the making coffee and my exercise routine every day.

Macy's meditation practice is dynamic and multidimensional as well:

> You know I think of my meditation as starting like pretty much the second that I wake up, so I have a routine and so I'm just being mindful of everything that I'm doing with my routine. You know, with getting my cup of tea and being thankful for that. Feeling gratitude for everything that I get to do just from the moment I step out onto the floor from my bed. So I get my tea and I just sit for a little bit in silence, no phone no nothing, just have that tea, being able to drink it and just kind of see where my mind goes and see what I'm either feeling stressed about and just observe. Nothing, nothing too crazy. Then I go and I unroll my yoga mat and I just kind of lay in Śavāsana and take like a bunch of deep breaths to just kind of center myself. And then you know I'll kind of do some exercises and stretches and then end with Śavāsana again and then I'll do some breathing exercises, where I'm envisioning you know, breathing in, I'm breathing in love gratitude, strength and confidence.

Macy's evening meditation is also dynamic in nature, and involves elements of movement, connecting with nature, gratitude and visualization:

> So typically, my meditation is in the mornings. However, I typically go outside in my garden every evening and water everything out there. I find that very meditative, and it is something I look forward to every single day, almost more than my morning routine. I don't have a set routine or anything in particular that I think about or do when I'm watering - I simply just see what thoughts enter my mind. More often than not, I end up going over my gratitude list again. I do try not to think about the never ending "to-do" list while I'm out there, and usually I do not. I also find myself envisioning being with my dad, and sending him that energy. I see him very clearly sitting out there with me at the little iron table and chairs under the tree while I'm watering, and I do believe he feels that energy. I spend about 20-30 minutes or so out there watering/harvesting/pulling grass, and I love it.

Six of the eight respondents highlighted the importance of intellectual knowledge in shaping and supporting their practice. Intellectual knowledge took the form of content taught during formal mindfulness/meditation courses, self-selected books, advice from friends/family and media (YouTube and TED Talk videos).

Peyton explained how Buddhist teachings found in books provided them with guidance on how to practice meditation:

> I guess like I mentioned, I would consider myself a Buddhist sort of. I read stuff about meditation in books by like, um prominent Buddhist figures from all over the place, and those tend to be insightful about life in general, as well as specific techniques for meditating. I usually kind of find some meaning in that, and like incorporate that into how I meditate basically.

Charlie shared how TED Talks and YouTube videos focused on mindfulness were catalysts leading him to explore meditation practice. He also revealed how workshops he attended at his community college's learning center provided him with intellectual knowledge, leading to his initial interest in developing a meditation practice, which ultimately led to Charlie attending a formal course on meditation:

> I had a fair amount of time on my hands, and last year I watched a lot of Ted Talks and one of the things, one of the subjects I watched a Ted Talk on was mindfulness. I actually had seen a couple of talks on YouTube and stuff on mindfulness, and at the

> learning center workshops on mindfulness meditation were what piqued my interest because you can read about something, and you can watch somebody talk about it but it's very different than even just dipping your toes into it, you know yeah, and I was thinking there's certainly no information out there saying it's a bad thing, none at all, and there seems to be a lot saying that these are practices good experiences so I wanted to see what that was about and then that led into the Koru class.

Forrest described how he gleaned valuable knowledge about meditation from a book:

> So this openness and curiosity that I approach school with, I would say in large part comes from my meditation. I discovered a book about how to meditate. It's one monk telling a younger monk, the process of meditation and how meditation works from a Christian practice. Now the interesting thing about this is my son's mom gave me this book back in 2000 right after my son was born and I had had it on the shelf for such a long time.

All eight of the respondents expressed how critically important accessing a formal course on meditation that included a community of meditators, as well as receiving the guidance of an experienced meditation teacher was for developing and maintaining their mediation practice. Krystal described how a formal meditation course offered at the community college she was attending supported her meditation practice:

> I think that because of my anxiety I sought out things like yoga and I was doing yoga a lot while I was going to community college. Then I took the Koru class and it taught me some mindfulness techniques like writing in a journal and meditation, different types of meditation that I could use and those things are things that I was using to help me with my anxiety because it doesn't feel good to be anxious.

Yasmeen shared that she learned valuable meditation practices from mindfulness workshops offered at her community college, “I mean when I took that first [Koru] workshop, I think it was last summer okay. When I learned when, after I attended you know, while I was learning, I practice the chicken breath.” Yasmeen continued to explain how the formal meditation course she attended introduced her to meditation practices that she incorporated into her life:

> I also like the walking meditation, but I didn’t practice it. . .like too often, I think I did it like a few times. I focus on more and in that time, I was doing more of the chicken

> breath, and then there was a specific meditation so we can focus, and I'm not sure if that was [guided] imagery? So I that works. That works for me.

Tracy explained how a formal meditation course being taught at her community college supported her practice:

> I began meditating after taking the meditation, Koru mindfulness class. And so it was really intriguing because my counselor, social worker had stressed the immediate need for me to do some sort of meditation to calm down, and refocus and re-anchor myself. And so this was a perfect opportunity last spring semester in college. And so when I did it, she was happy I was doing it. And so I was hoping there was going to be more and there was all semester. So I did more and I came to realize how much I do not give myself loving kindness or give myself a break. And so I do it as often as need be and also I could use reminders to do it on a daily basis. And I have found that it has helped keep me re-focused re-centered.

Six of the eight respondents made connections to nature as they shared their meditation practice experiences. Some accounts involved how meditation shaped their relationships with the natural worlds, whereas other descriptions highlighted how nature contributed to their meditation practice experiences. In other words, the data suggests that there is a bidirectional relationship between nature and meditation practice.

Forrest explained how his meditation practice has made him feel more connected to nature, while precipitating a deep respect and non-harming orientation toward all living things:

> I can say I feel more elaborate. I feel as though this expansiveness that I speak about has put me into contact, and I've fallen in love with, like my grapefruit tree, with all plants and animals. Like I don't kill bugs. I am playful with the flies that fly around me and that, I did not ever see that coming. I didn't. When I was responding and talking to the fly, and I was out for a run and I was saying sorry to these little flies, that there's a whole group of them to do this. I know that sometimes I'm running and really sweaty, that they get stuck to me or they, you know, get in my eye. If I go to take them out, of course I kill them. And so I was trying to somehow get around that and not hurt them. And that was probably my first moment where I was like, well, there's something different about me.

James shared the important role the natural world has plays in his meditation practice, and alludes to the fact that it enriches his meditation experiences:

> One thing that I've always enjoyed, I just always enjoy listening to the sounds outside while I'm meditating. It just kind of gives a different clarity. And some of my best

> meditations have been when I've been out in nature, where I'm just sitting there and I just can feel the elements. Like I can feel the wind. I can feel the different temperatures. I can hear I can hear the wind. I can hear the birds. I can hear wind rustling from the leaves, so I would say that subconsciously nature does play a small role, and especially living in the city, I think the closest I can get to nature is opening up my window, just so I can kind of get that small wind coming through like even this morning, I noticed that I was listening to the birds, there were just kind of chirping outside and just those little details.

Macy described a really transformational experience that emerged from her meditation down by a river during one summer. According to Macy while lying on a rock, practicing a meditation involving breath awareness and a gatha, she was visited by a bird, a frog and dragonfly – symbolizing that she wasn't alone. At that time in her life, she was feeling quite alone, and Macy attributes her meditation practice in nature to her gaining a different perspective. She felt at peace, and less lonely.

> And you know I did that same kind of breathing meditation to kind of center myself, and the bird and the frog were there, and it made me feel like you know, okay. . . oh, there was a dragonfly too but I can't exactly remember where that came in. But I'm like wow that's kind of trippy and it made me, you know think okay, I'm not as alone, as I think you know, I'm feeling this energy from this bird, or even a frog, you know they kind of symbolized something for me, you know that I wasn't alone. I can't really, it's hard to remember exactly how I felt after that, but I knew it was wild and it kind of you know, made everything seem like small, like all my issues kind of seemed smaller after that, because I'm like wow this is, you know, I was so focused, you know, on these feelings of like self-pity that's not the right word but, just like oh poor me, and you know, after this kind of happened I'm like oh wait, like the world is so much like, there's so much more outside of this little small like, I don't have friends, I have nothing and it's like oh wait I just came to this river and was able to lay on this rock by myself on this warm beautiful day and had this cool experience, you know that made me smile. And made me kind of ponder different things, and that kind of took my mind off of you know any fear or stress that I was feeling. I'm like life is cool man, that was totally a trip so.

Yasmeen provided an account of how nature heavily influenced her meditation experience while practicing guided imagery, a particular meditation practice. She described how she imagined being back home in Mexico, spending time by a creek near her family's house:

> Yes, I, like the guided imagery meditation because when [the meditation teacher] asked to think of a place, I like to think about a creek in front of our house down the hill, because our house was like on a hill and down there was a creek with a lot of huge rocks and huge trees. And it was, I think, one of the best places in my life and because I have a lot of memories from there. Like one day when it was a rainy time, the creek, like grow

with a lot of water. Also on the huge trees before we get to the creek we used to throw like a rope, the one we used for the cows and horses and used it as a swing. And it was really when I was like sitting there, I was having a lot of fun. I enjoyed that a lot and guess I go to this place when I'm meditating.

Theme: Outcomes Associated with Meditation Practice

Table 3
Outcomes Associated with Meditation Practice

Outcomes Associated with Mediation Practice
Meditation Was Helpful from the Onset of Practice
Increased Awareness
Development of Acceptance
Cultivation of a Sense of Calm
Improved Mental Clarity
Improved Focus and Attention
Increased Capacity to Navigate Difficult Thoughts and Emotions
Promoted Changes in Perspective
Cultivated Mindfulness
Promoted the Incorporation of Mindfulness Into Daily Life

Six of the eight respondents reported experiencing positive outcomes from the onset of meditation practice. The six respondents who reported initial positive outcomes provided specific examples that included increased awareness (internal experiences and external stimuli), improved focus and attention, becoming grounding in the present moment, feeling of joy, and feeling more relaxed/peaceful.

Macy and Peyton, however; explained that they both experienced negative feelings during their initial meditation experiences. Feelings such as frustration related to excessive mind-wandering and mental discomfort were both present during their initial practice. Both Macy and Peyton expressed that they were unsure if they were "doing it right." It is important to note, that both of them started meditating on their own without any formal teaching (course

and/or teacher). This is an important discovery, as it illuminates the benefit and oftentimes, the necessity of receiving formal training in meditation to ensure positive results are achieved, while creating the conditions for beginning meditators to continue practice rather than give up due to unmet expectations. It is important to note, that both Macy and Peyton continued practice as they believed in time, meditation would improve their lives. Both of the respondents eventually took formal courses on mindfulness/meditation practice, and from these formal learning experiences, they began to progress in positive ways.

As mentioned, the majority of the respondents (six out of eight) found meditation practice to be useful with positive outcomes emerging from initial practice. Five of the six associated with this group, began meditation practice through formal teaching – classes taught by qualified mindfulness and meditation teachers. Again, this is an important finding, as it highly suggests that the presence of formal meditation training during one's beginning meditation practice is associated with positive initial outcomes, and continued practice.

Each of the respondents reported that their meditation practice increased their moment-to-moment and general awareness. Aspects of increased awareness included self-awareness (psychological and physical), awareness of others, enhanced sensory experience awareness and an increased awareness of, as well as connection to, the natural world. Lastly, an overall sense of increased presence was a meaningful development for some of the respondents, reflecting a culmination of the individual aspects of awareness listed above.

A particularly interesting finding involved Krystal's account of how meditation practice led to an increased self-understanding of her values and interests. Such a discovery motivated her to engage in activism,

> I think that like through doing stuff like that [meditation] and experiencing that it's something that's like become very empowering to me. I think that being able to like understand myself more, and that has allowed me to seek out different things that I'm interested in. I think I thought I was very open minded. But, I mean, that's just, it's very

> relative and even now I know that there are so many things that I don't know about, but I'm doing more things, like I participate in like activism. Um, I am very interested in social justice issues in general. I want to do it all. And I've got a little bit more information about those things. And I understand more about the things that like, some things that are really important to me.

For Forrest, Tracy and Peyton, the development of awareness cultivated a sense of empathy and compassion for others. According to Forrest, a feeling of love and compassion for others naturally emerged from his breath awareness practice, whereas Peyton and Tracy have actively practiced loving-kindness meditation helping them develop an awareness that leads to compassion and empathy towards others.

Charlie shared how his meditation practice has led to an awareness of how his thoughts drive his behaviors, particularly as it relates to his academic habits:

> . . .[meditation] also opened my eyes, to what was really going on in my mind. Training focus, learning to be mindful of my wandering mind and what is causing me to have certain behaviors towards a situation, say an assignment or something. I kind of took it as it helps you to learn to come back to your focus, so you don't completely get distracted and just get lost, but I also looked at it as something that would open my eyes to what was actually on my mind, and maybe driving some behaviors. Why I don't I want to do this, one assignment or why am I having so much trouble and can't get started on an assignment, and making more connections to behaviors.

Krystal provided an example of how her meditation practice led to a greater awareness of her physiological experiences. She explained that her anxiety has led to constricted breathing at Times. According to Krystal, meditation practice allowed her to connect with her bodily sensations while becoming more aware of how her breathing was negatively impacted by her anxious energy. Meditation practice improved her ability to regulate breathing through increased awareness, leading to increased physical comfort:

> When I get anxious, I probably start taking really shallow breaths and I feel like after I can like meditate or something, I feel like I am able to like completely breathe and it wasn't something that I noticed before, but afterwards I feel better. Like, I'm just able to breathe better and it's more comfortable to be in my body, I guess.

Peyton discussed how they began developing feelings of frustration and anger due to what they perceived as irresponsible behaviors of many people in response to the COVID-19

pandemic. Their experience of the pandemic also caused them great sadness, while reflecting on the suffering many experienced as a result of the global disaster. Peyton works in the funeral industry, and witnessed firsthand both the devastating effects of the pandemic, and poor healthcare management while visiting nursing homes. Peyton described how practicing loving-kindness meditation helped her manage these very strong emotions, and ultimately, their meditation practice led to increased compassion and empathy for others:

> . . .so I ended up channeling some of that energy into meditation because I just didn't know what else to do. I also ended up reading a bunch of Buddhist material about how to deal with that kind of anger and connect with the compassion for people who are suffering that comes along with it. I would do kind of a metta meditation during work sometimes while my mind wasn't occupied to connect with that, where I would focus a bit on my breath and direct compassion to the people I was working with or had worked with in the past, for a few seconds to a few minutes.

Forrest described how meditation precipitated a sense of presence, leading to the emergence of compassion and empathy for others, in particular for his nephew who has struggled with poor mental health:

> So, and the ability to share the peace and **presence**. I have in my own self. To offer healing with other people through that piece, that's another support for me, knowing that that with this I can contribute to other people's lives, strangers, friends, family, to truly be there when I need to be. Most recently, my nephew is struggling with some schizophrenia, and to be able to know that I can show up, and that I can be there, while it's difficult sometimes, somehow, I'm able to attend. What I need to attend to without freaking out. And I think it's the same energies that come from that awareness, is being in this awareness with him and moving around with the family and knowing that I don't have to know what to say. But I just show up.

James reported that meditation practice became enjoyable and meaningful as he experienced the cultivation of presence:

> . . . And that was kind of when I really started to enjoy meditation, and just the idea of taking yourself away from. . . it was, I guess, in a way, being more in the **present** moment, rather than just kind of going through the motions, it was taking a moment to stop and actually think about what you're doing. So that's when it started, and that's when I began to practice on my own because I really enjoyed that whole idea of just trying to stop everything in life and kind of focus on what you're doing at that moment.

All eight of the respondents articulated how their meditation practice experiences promoted an increased sense of acceptance. Macy described how meditation practice has helped her become more psychologically resilient, through the development of acceptance. She shared how through meditation practice, the ability to accept life's challenges and move toward helpful solutions has been transformative. The process of acceptance through meditation practice is captured here:

> I was like oh my God, I felt like completely out of control, there's nothing that I could do to change this and that feeling was not, it was not great, but after you know, all of the stuff kind of happening for a long time and getting in touch with myself [through meditation practice], yeah I would definitely say you know that my resilience, has you know, even though I have always been resilient, I feel like it's a different type of resilience, it's like dealing with tragedy, like absolute tragedy and then having to go, all right, what are we going to do about this, what are the next steps? Besides breaking down and crying, and like because that's what I want to do, I want to kick and scream and yell and say, give me my dad but that's not going to do anything you know. So it's just all right, let's do it. What are the next steps? So it's being able to focus more on constructive things that can be done.

Peyton provided evidence of how they learned to accept that anxiety is a part of their life through meditation practice, and that "sitting with it" rather than running from difficult emotions is a more adaptive way of addressing anxiety. This is an important discovery, as it aligns with Kabat-Zinn's (1994) conceptualization of mindfulness, and the mechanisms and benefits that are associated with meditation practice - acceptance being a key element of the mindfulness process.

> Yeah I would say um a lot of what I get anxious about is situational stuff. Like I wouldn't say I have generalized anxiety disorder, but when there is a stressful thing going on, it kind of bleeds into my whole life at once and I'll feel generally more anxious about it right, and so, meditation doesn't really lessen how much that happens to me, you know. I'm, not less, anxious, but I do deal with it better. When I meditate and then even when I'm not meditating, when I use those skills to like sit with how I'm feeling instead of running away from it and trying to just like block it out with something else, that seems to be a more productive way for me to deal with it.

All eight respondents reported feeling a sense of calm during and after their meditation Practices. However, a sense of calm did not always materialize during every meditation session. Regardless of the frequency, every respondent clearly articulated how their meditation experiences were associated with this sense of calm. Tracy described how just a few minutes of meditation practice had led to a sense of calm, "I was surprised that I was able to get a serene peace. It's a peace with very little to no effort. Within a few minutes." During James' time as a community college student, he coached a rowing team, a source of joy, as well as stress. He explained how he utilized meditation as a way to create a sense of calm before big rowing competitions:

> It started off as maybe once a week and then I began to do it about three times a week, so I was kind of under a routine of like Monday, Wednesday, Friday occasionally. Because also I was coaching for the rowing team as well, when we'd have big races I'd also add meditations in on those morning, just to kind of keep myself calm and get ready for the day.

Krystal shared an experience that captures how her meditation practice has contributed to her ability to access a sense of calm, through the process of becoming more present during outdoor activities. Krystal's narrative below was her response to the prompt "Please describe your most recent meditation experience":

> . . .And I remember at some point, I kind of just took a break and I like turned around to look back, and I'm kind of up above this layer of fog. I found a spot to kind of, like dip off on, and just kind of kick my legs over the edge of the hill kind of. And I just sat there, and I was just looking, and just thinking and just trying to like, just look and kind of think less and less and just be very. . . I'm just trying to really enjoy everything that I could see because it was really pretty, like the sun and then the fog. My body was hurting so I didn't really, I was kind of exhausted. I didn't really have much else to think about. I was very relaxed.

Each and every respondent has experienced mental clarity as a result of meditation practice. For some, this mental clarity emerges consistently from practice, whereas other respondents reported a more sporadic frequency associated with mental clarity.

When Charlie was asked to elaborate on the benefits associated with his meditation practice, he responded with the following statement:

> Sure, clarity. For me it helped me to clear a lot of jumbled stuff that was going on in my mind when, if I had assignments due, and I was struggling with them, or I would get stressed or whatnot. You go through some of these meditation processes, and it would help me, it was helpful. First of all, it teaches you to refocus right, it gives you. . . it's an exercise to learn how to focus and to want to come back to focus, if you wander, not to get carried away, but it also opened my eyes, a lot to what was really going on in my mind.

Tracy explained how her meditation practice can produce mental clarity, but this desired mental clarity is not always achieved:

> Sometimes I don't get the mental clarity, I would like to achieve and then that's where the being kinder needs to come in. Because I expect mental clarity right away, or in a day or month. And sometimes I get it in my sleep, like I woke up this morning and wasn't sure what I was going to do. I need to write a schedule and I don't know how to do that schedule because I don't always remember what needs to be done at that moment, and then I step back and allow for the slowness of breath. And sometimes I get the mental clarity and sometimes I cannot.

Six of the eight respondents associated their meditation practices with improved focus and attentional capacity. For example, Peyton shared the following statement as they were recalling some of their meditation practice experiences, “Usually I feel more focused afterwards and like calmer, especially if I'm stressing out.” According to Tracy, meditation practice helps her access a sense of centeredness and focus while utilizing her attentional capacities, “I have found that [meditation] has helped with refocusing and recentering.” Yasmeen described an experience she had with a walking meditation, capturing how the practice increased her focus:

> I was able to, like to, again be in a silence in a silence moment. And to start listening like, like listening, to the various small noises in my home or outside my home. And, yes. And also observing the way I was. I was feeling the carpet when my feet were going, on every step. And just this hallway. It was like I was more focused.

One of the subthemes that emerged and appeared to be quite meaningful to all eight respondents was how meditation practice led to an improved ability to navigate difficult thoughts, emotions and physical experiences during meditation practice. The respondents also reported that this increased capacity to regulate their thoughts, emotions and physical

experiences through meditation practice, improved their ability to handle challenging situations outside of their meditation sessions. This ability to apply the cognitive, emotional, and physical changes associated with meditation practice during day-to-day experiences, is often referred to as "Applying mindfulness skills off of the cushion." The fact that the respondents were able to apply their improved cognitive, emotional and physiological regulation skills during day-to-day activities, is a salient and promising finding.

James shared how his meditation practice has led to his improved ability to handle anger, an emotion that he has historically struggled with:

> I noticed that when I did have stress, prior to meditation it would kind of build up and bottle up inside and I know I'm not an angry person, but I can tell that there were just small little snippets that I would say towards people that might come across as aggressive where I guess you can say I was biting at them and they could tell that, and I could tell that, it wasn't very productive. So I'd say at least, meditation, it made my anger processing more manageable for my peers and my surroundings.

Tracy described how her meditation practice has improved her ability to manage her frustration and anger better. She notices negative energy in her body and is able communicate in a more productive manner, "I don't yell as often. I can feel the sensation in my body, when I need to do a meditation. . . I am able to use words better than I was before."

Macy explained how a particular meditation session helped her explore some difficult emotions, and through the practice of awareness and release, she was able to navigate those challenging emotions in an adaptive manner:

> So, it makes me feel at first, I think, I actually feel a little more anxious because I'm kind of opening this box that I usually keep closed. And so I open that up, so I can just really get in touch with myself and understand what I'm feeling, what could be the cause or the root of some stress or anxiety that I'm feeling. So I kind of open that up and I deal with that first. I'm like okay, it's this and it's this and it's this. And so I get that out. Okay, this is what I'm dealing with, and then you know once I'm kind of able to do that it kind of releases those things you know just temporarily because they are always there. You know, in my brain, but just for that moment, so I can release them temporarily, and then you know make space in my head, so I can really focus on the meditation, so once I get

> through, you know kind of the anxiety of having to reopen that box, it feels it feels lighter. I usually feel pretty heavy a lot because of what I'm dealing with.

Krystal expressed how meditation practice has helped her manage her emotional and physical response to stress due to feeling overwhelmed with day-to-day obligations:

> I can get really stressed out and I'll be trying to do something, and I'll be getting like really irritable, really like irritated with things easily. Or sometimes, I'll be like, trying to do something and my hands are shaking and I haven't realized that I've been just trying to tackle too many things and I haven't realized how stressed out I really am until my body starts showing me. And that's not something that gets that far, or that, crazy out of control when I take the time to just like stop and check in with myself and kind of like sit somewhere and focus on myself and ask my body how it's doing, ask myself, whatever that really means, how I'm doing um, I guess. Yeah, that is important.

Charlie shared an experience he had with a neighbor that reflects his increased capacity to handle difficult situations as a result of his meditation practice. According to Charlie, a mindfulness analogy that is often used as a meditative visualization technique, helped him respond to an angry neighbor during a disagreement in a more measured, adaptive manner:

> . . .I love that rushing river tactic of just letting it go down, the you know, climbing on the [river] bank and letting those thoughts go down the river and I can tell you that earlier this year, this summer, actually, I had a huge issue with a neighbor. The guy did something, and I asked to talk with him about it, he ended up angry, I had a 67 year old guy in my face with his fists up like he wanted to fight out in the street, and because all I asked him to do is not to blow his leaves out into the street, it bothered me a lot, because I had a lot of interactions with this guy in the past, and I was using that river technique and a few other kinds to deal with that situation when it would pop up occasionally and that's one of the things that meditation does, is just to take the temperature of what's kind of going on, what am I thinking about, and if something's bothering me to use some other tools to try to deal with that thing.

Every one of the respondents expressed that their meditation practice promoted a shift in perspective. Forrest described an experience he had that represents a change in perspective precipitated by his ongoing meditation practice. During his interviews Forrest shared on a few occasions that meditation practice helped him realize that using mind altering substances (in particular alcohol and marijuana), “was cheating,” and meditation represented a more authentic

way to calm his mind, and reach inner silence. Such a change in perspective toward substance use is a monumental finding, as Forrest has a history of substance abuse. More and more research is emerging that shifts in perspective related to how individuals relate to their addictions is a key element in addiction recovery.

> One time I went to smoke a little bit with him. So I was like, I took one little, little hit, and I realized as I started the hit, I was like, this is cheating, I don't like this. And so, I tried to have a quiet moment with myself or whatever, and the whole time, my brain was telling me that I had done something different than sitting in the silence. And I was like, that blew my mind, that I knew that somehow that created another relationship that I don't have words for. . .

Tracy also shared that meditation practice has given her a tool to "gain perspective" and look at her life in "a different light." Tracy was referring to how she has gained perspective as she reflects back on her traumatic childhood. Mediation practice has helped her realize that she cannot change the past, and how she takes care of herself in the present is an area of her life that she can control.

An interesting finding related to perspective-taking that emerged involves a shift in perspective regarding the feeling of loneliness. Macy, Krystal and Yasmeen reported that meditation practice helped them recognize the feelings of loneliness, and over time, helped them change their perception towards these feelings – essentially all three respondents felt less lonely, and found more comfort in solitude.

An example of this particular shift in perspective is presented below. Macy experienced a profound change of perspective as a result of her meditation practice. She recognized that having time to herself, although at the time she felt lonely, allowed her to self-reflect in a way that most likely would only have occurred through isolation. Macy's perception of being alone, fundamentally changed:

> You know if I wasn't alone and wasn't tapping into myself and observing my surroundings, you know if I went with other people, or if I didn't go at all, obviously I wouldn't have, been able to do that, but if I went with other people we'd be you know, we'd be talking, we'd be doing things and I wouldn't be able to have had that experience, so it kind of changed my perception of, okay, it's okay. I'm okay being alone. This is what I need right now. And it's not a bad thing. So yeah, it kind of changed my perception of things.

When asked how she has changed since meditating, Yasmeen replied:

> Something that has changed is that, I starting have more hope. . . Because some, there was a time or, I don't know if most of my time, that I've been feeling alone. And I think, that has made me feel not alone.

Here's Krystal's account of how meditation practiced cultivated perspective-taking in a manner that helped her manage her feelings of loneliness after she broke up with a partner:

> . . .it was probably exactly what I needed because I think it kind of just let me be okay with what was going on in my head. And let me feel like I was okay with not only being physically alone, but okay with the thought of it and okay with not liking it, if that makes sense. Like, I didn't like to be by myself all the time, but I was accepting of that reality. But it wasn't something that just came to me. So I had to work on it. And I think that going to the [Koru] classes, is something that really helped me with play with that idea.

Krystal also explained that meditation practice led to a change in perspective regarding the concept of self-care. According to Krystal, her meditation practice developed her awareness of the fact that she needed to address some of her psychological struggles in intentional ways, and that this commitment to herself was okay.

Increased mindfulness capacity was associated with all of the respondent's meditation practice experiences. Bishop and colleagues (2004) define mindfulness as "A kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is (p. 232)." The literature review presented research strongly suggesting that increased mindfulness, oftentimes a product of meditation, is associated with many positive psychological outcomes. Krystal explained how mindfulness was cultivated during the beginning stages of her meditation practice:

> I kind of was in a space where I was trying to figure out how to be okay with, just being by myself. Um, and so it was probably exactly what I needed because I think it kind of just let me be okay with what was going on in my head, and let me feel like I was okay with not only being physically alone, but okay with the thought of it and okay with not liking it, if that makes sense. Like, I didn't like to be by myself all the time, but I was accepting of that reality.

Peyton described a recent meditation experience in terms of cultivating more mindfulness, with a particular emphasis on the process of becoming aware of thoughts in a non-elaborative, non-judgmental and present-centered manner:

> . . . I sit cross-legged and start focusing on my breath. Usually I'll focus on it coming in and out of my nose because that's a nice specific point that I can use, um and then just focus on that, when thoughts come I'll hopefully you know, I sort of register them, and I think of it like putting them on a shelf. That's what kind of works for me. I'll be like oh that's a thought I'm having and I'll think about it later, you know it's kind of still there, but more in the background. Um, but sometimes I'll get distracted and I'll start planning something or getting a little thought loop and then they will usually happen multiple times a session, so once I noticed that's happening because that's what's frustrating about that right, you'll start thinking about it, and then you don't realize that you're thinking about it, instead of meditating. So I'll realize that I'm doing that, pull myself back to focusing on my breath where it's exiting and entering my nose and just do that.

All eight respondents articulated that their meditation practice created the conditions leading to more day-to-day experience associated with mindfulness outside of their formal meditation practice. Krystal explained that her meditation practice progressively cultivated more present-centered awareness during her hikes in nature:

> I also, I started incorporating it into like when I go hiking. I got really into hiking and it's like it's the same feeling, like the mindful walking that I remember I tried to do that while I'm hiking and it's really nice for me to be able to like, be away from any distractions and just be out in nature, and try to like focus on my feet, maybe get lost in my thoughts but also be able to kind of like clear, a lot of the clutter or a lot of the racing thoughts that I get out of my head and just be able to be there. . .

Yasmeen shared that she is able to regulate her emotions better during difficult conversations with family. Prior to her meditation practice, she would be quite reactive, and not respond adaptively. Yasmeen is now able to both walk away when feeling irritated during family disputes, and engage in communication is a calm and respectful manner when necessary.

She attributes this improved emotional regulation and family communication to her meditation practice.

Peyton described how metta meditation, also referred to as loving-kindness meditation, has increased her mindfulness as pertains to her day-to-day interactions with other human beings. They explained that practicing metta meditation, also referred to as loving kindness and/or compassion meditation, increased her compassion and patience with people when interacting with others outside of their formal practice. Peyton touched upon this process here:

> That in particular, and in general our government's response to covid, made me very angry, and there was pretty much nothing I could do about either the virus or people's responses, so I ended up channeling some of that energy into meditation because I just didn't know what else to do. I also ended up reading a bunch of Buddhist material about how to deal with that kind of anger and connect with the compassion for people who are suffering that comes along with it. I would do kind of a metta meditation during work sometimes while my mind wasn't occupied to connect with that where I would focus a bit on my breath and direct compassion to the people I was working with or had worked with in the past, for a few seconds to a few minutes.

Theme: Challenges Associated with Meditation Practice

All eight respondents revealed that they experienced challenges associated with their meditation practice. Six out of the eight respondents stated that a perceived lack of free time was a challenge associated with their mediation practice. Tracy explained that her busy schedule keeps her from practicing meditation at times:

> I've been busy, I would like to be more productive. So it's just being online too much. And time gets away. I try to check my emails, personal and student, and it takes hours instead of minutes or half an hour. And then the day gets away from me, or I just finished laundry and I sit and fall asleep or I just forget.

Yasmeen stated that school takes up a vast majority of her time, and this can make it difficult to find time to meditate, “Like, the biggest challenge is, when I have a lot of assignments, and assignments from our a single class, like last semester.” Yasmeen also discussed how her role as a mother to three boys makes it difficult to carve out time to meditate.

Although a perceived lack of time to meditate was a common theme among respondents, six of the eight respondents were quite candid in stating that there are times when they simply

don’t feel like meditating, and choose to participate in other activities. Peyton reflected such a theme as they described their morning activities:

> I would say just timing in the day, because a lot of the time you know I don't wake up and immediately want to go meditate. I usually want to go eat breakfast or something so oftentimes, I'll end up putting it off. And I would say that's something I'm trying to get better at is doing it in the morning before I really get going on anything else, because it is best for me to meditate before I start reading or working on a project or going to work or something. And then I would just say playing into that timing issue like if I work in the morning, if I work at 8am, and I stay up too late to really want to wake up even earlier to meditate so I usually end up doing it in the evening after I get home and that just tends not to go as well, but it's still productive.

As shared previously, relationships with others represented influential factors that positively contributed to respondent meditation practice experiences (e.g., some respondents were introduced to meditation by others, or a community of meditators supported their ongoing practice). However, four of the respondents reported that relationships with others has also negatively influenced their meditation practices experiences.

James described how loud roommates represented a barrier to meditation practice:

> I had some roommates that were kind of loud in the mornings, and so, then, if I woke up a little bit later, if I woke up at around 7:15 and then I started my practice, they'd be in the kitchen and then I just kind of would get too focused on what they were doing rather than what I was supposed to be doing. So those were my biggest barriers, was just outside interferences.

Yasmeen shared that struggles associated with her marriage have led to depression and suicide ideation. Such psychological distress emanating from her strained relationship with her husband has made it difficult to meditate at times according to Yasmeen. Tracy also explained that challenges associated with her marriage represent barriers to meditation practice:

> He's very fragile and volatile, too. So I'm guessing everything came to a head when he got lost in the car and raging, and screaming, and very violently angry. But with no physical contact, just his voice. And it's tough.

All of the respondents shared that psychologically distressing, intrusive thoughts and emotions made meditation a difficult practice at times. Each of the respondents expressed that focusing their attention on one thing (an anchor or object of meditation), is a difficult endeavor

in general during meditation, and the fact that difficult thoughts and emotions represented a consistent source of distraction, has at times made meditation practice a challenging experience. Charlie explained how his inability to focus his attention during meditation was a source of great frustration, and in fact, this led him to take a break from meditation:

> Um I got to a point where I was having extreme difficulty focusing. And it wasn't just a one day thing, it became every time I would sit down to meditate I felt like my mind would start racing, rather than just kind of wandering and coming back to your breath or anchor, or you're focusing on your body scan or whatnot. I felt like my mind was just racing out of control when I would close my eyes and meditate . . . And I needed to break that chain, because I was, I would sit down and say okay you need do a better job of this, to be a little more focused, to be more on point but it just wouldn't work. I felt like it was getting away from me, so I just stopped for a little while.

Peyton described how they became frustrated during the early stages of their practice as a result of their inability to stay focused on their anchor, leading to a wandering mind:

> I think I tried to focus on like a point somewhere inside my head I'm like I don't know how to explain it because it was this weird little feeling I would produce. But you know if you try hard for a little bit you can have just about no thoughts in your head but it's very difficult to keep up. And then, as soon as you fail, it's very frustrating. So I would feel like I had failed whenever I thought about something which was a really unproductive way to meditate, as it turns out.

Krystal acknowledged that sitting with her thoughts has been the biggest challenge associated with her meditation practice:

> I mean, I think maybe the biggest one is to get over like the mental block. I guess the biggest challenge is to be able to just maybe even like, sit long enough to let yourself reap the benefits of meditation. Sometimes it can be hard for me to just sit in my thoughts.

Textual and Structural Descriptions

The previous sections capturing the four themes, and the related subthemes, reflect thematic analysis, in which the data provided evidence of what was experienced, in this case meditation practice, in the form of textural descriptions, and how it was experienced utilizing structural descriptions. What did the students experience through their mediation practice? First

of all, each and every one of the respondents were experiencing significant psychological stress entering the initial stages of their meditation practice. In fact, all eight of the respondents cited their inner and outer turmoil as motivation to explore meditation practice. The majority of respondents, six out of eight, reported that meditation practice was a useful tool at the onset of practice, and that this provided them with a sense of hope. Although two of the respondents struggled in the beginning, they stuck with it, and expressed an intuitive sense that meditation practice would serve them well in the future.

Respondents experienced psychological and physical benefits such as increased awareness, growth of acceptance, development of a sense of calm and mental clarity, as well as improved focus and attention. The respondents also reported that meditation practice improved their ability to navigate difficult thoughts, emotions and physical experiences. In addition, respondents attributed their meditation practice to improved mindfulness capacity, and in turn, an increased ability to incorporate mindfulness during their daily lives. An increased awareness and connection to nature was an important aspect of meditation practice for six of the eight respondents. Changes in perspective were experienced by four of the respondents. Respondents also experienced challenges associated with their meditation practice. Boredom and/or a busy schedule led them to choosing other activities other than meditating. Also, all eight of the respondents shared that mind-wandering that included intrusive, difficult thoughts and emotions was a frequent experience.

In what context did the students experience meditation practice? As shared earlier, each of the respondents was experiencing psychological stress when they began their meditation practice. The psychological stress they were experiencing can be framed as a textural element, what they experienced, as well as a structural component, representing the context in which their

meditation practice evolved from. All eight of the respondents received formal training from an experienced meditation teacher at some point during their initial exploration of meditation practice. These training experiences included peer group support, essentially providing a community of meditators to learn and grow with. Intellectual knowledge from books, forms of media and in the form of relationships with others, influenced their meditation practice experiences. The meditation practice experiences of the respondents emerged from a dynamic and multi-dimensional process. Technical aspects such as length of sessions, scheduling of practice and particular meditation techniques created the conditions for what they experienced in terms of the phenomenon. The entire respondent group experimented with multiple forms of meditation practices at some point, and their meditation practices developed in ways that reflected a variety of activities and processes. Although relationships with others represented a positive influence for their meditation practice experiences, other people also were associated with barriers to practice according to the respondents.

The Essence of the Experience

The essence, also known as the essential, invariant structure, is a composite description of a phenomenon, in this case meditation practice. The essence is a product of synthesizing the textural and structural descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The ultimate essence captures the meaning ascribed to the experience.

Through the process of synthesizing the textural and structural descriptions generated from the respondents, and utilizing what Moustakas (1994, p. 110) refers to as intuitive integration, the essence of the respondents' meditation practice experience is as follows: Psychological struggles were the catalysts for the respondents to explore meditation practice. The psychological stress present in the lives of the respondents also shaped their experiences in

terms of the phenomenon, meditation practice. Meditation practice proved challenging for some in the beginning, whereas some respondents found meditation practice to be quite helpful immediately. Every one of the respondents benefited from a formal course, taught by a qualified meditation teacher. A community of meditators belonging to such courses represented critical support for the respondents as they developed their meditation practice. According the respondent's accounts, meditation practice improves psychological health in a variety of ways. However, environmental and internal experiences can present barriers to practice that may lead to the slowed progress, or in some cases, abandonment of meditation practice. Lastly, meditation practice precipitates the development of mindfulness, and this mindful awareness is applied outside of formal meditation practice, showing up for respondents during their day-to-day experiences.

Summary

Chapter four presented the findings of this research study. Significant statements generated from the interviews were analyzed through the process of horizonalization, leading to the development of four major themes. Three of the themes captured several specific subthemes and were presented within each of sections that described the three over-arching themes. The themes and associated subthemes represented both textural, or the what, and structural, essentially the how/contextual, elements of the lived experiences of the respondents. Direct quotes from the respondents provided the reader with how the respondents ascribed meaning to their meditation practice experiences, in their own words. The textural and structural elements were synthesized to establish the essential, invariant structure, or essence of the experience, in this case – the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation.

The next chapter, chapter four, provides the readership with a discussion of the findings, implication for practice and an exploration of future research possibilities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

> "*I think that like through doing stuff like that [meditation] and experiencing that it's something that's like become very empowering to me. I think that being able to like understand myself more, and that has allowed me to seek out different things that I'm interested in. I think I thought I was very open minded. But, I mean, that's just, it's very relative and even now I know that there are so many things that I don't know about, but I'm doing more things, like I participate in like activism. Um, I am very interested in social justice issues in general. I want to do it all. And I've got a little bit more information about those things. And I understand more about the things that like, some things that are really important to me."*
>
> -Krystal, respondent

This study investigated the phenomenon of meditation practice as experienced by community college students. Such an examination contributes to existing bodies of knowledge. that have emerged from prior research suggesting that meditation practice might represent an educational, programmatic, and therapeutic modality in supporting the academic success and wellness of community college students (Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin & Greeson, 2010; Gu, Xu & Zhu, 2016; Lemay, Hoolahan & Buchanan, 2019). Considering the important role community colleges play in contributing to accessible and equitable educational outcomes for students pursuing higher education in the U.S., as well as the role community colleges serve in developing professionals entering the workforce, understanding how community colleges can better support students academically while addressing their psychological needs is an urgent matter.

Utilizing Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology approach, the study was framed by two broad, general questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have the respondents experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected the experiences of the phenomenon? These two framing questions ensured that the data collected

led to textural and structural descriptions of the experiences. Ultimately, such inquiry provided an understanding of the common experiences shared by all respondents, while illuminating some outlier experiences. The overarching research question guiding the study was, "What are the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation?" The first secondary research question utilized was, "What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices?" The subsequent secondary research question was, "What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students?"

Discussion of Findings

The results that emerged from this transcendental phenomenology study supported previous, compelling and nascent research suggesting that meditation practice has the potential to contribute to the psychological wellness of community college students (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014). The data also aligns with previous research highlighting the challenges many community college students face while pursuing their academic goals, particularly as it pertains to psychological wellbeing (Quinn, 2014; Katz & Davison, 2014). Each of respondents were experiencing moderate levels of psychological stress during their meditation practice experiences while attending community college. All eight of the respondents in the current study were highly motivated as a result of their psychological distress to explore meditation as a potential practice for improved psychological health.

Once the respondents began practicing meditation, the initial results were mixed. Five of the eight respondents found meditation practice to be relatively easy to practice in the beginning stages, and perceived the practice to be initially helpful, while others struggled with meditation practice. One respondent, Forrest, stated that his meditation practice was uncomfortable in the

beginning, however; he also recognized the benefits of learning to sit with the discomfort. Peyton and Taylor, respondents who did not perceive their initial meditation practice experiences as positive endeavors, began meditation practice with no formal guidance. Forrest and Peyton did eventually participate in formal meditation training, led by a knowledgeable teacher. Both reported that their formal meditation training opportunities enhanced their meditation practice experiences. This finding supports previous research proclaiming that structured and quality teaching is likely a key determinant in the success of college student meditators (Lemay, Hoolahan, & Buchanan, 2019; O'Driscoll, Byrne, Mc Gillicuddy, Lambert, & Sahm, 2017).

The key element here is the fact that seven out of the eight students in this study reported that either their initial, positive experience at the onset of their meditation practice, or that their practice experience was enhanced, due to formal teaching that consisted of formal and structured training of which was facilitated by a knowledgeable meditation teacher. Four of the respondents took a break from meditation practice once their participation in a formal course ended. These students explicitly cited the lack of formal teaching and meditation community support as a major factor for their inconsistent practice. In sum, the presence of a formal meditation course, a qualified teacher and a community of meditators contributes to initial meditation practice development, as well as continued practice for community college students. This salient finding will be discussed further in subsequent sections of this chapter in terms of implications and recommendations.

The psychological experiences and outcomes associated with the meditation practices of respondents reflect similar findings from previous meditation research. Increased awareness has been linked to meditation practice (Baer, 2003; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011). The cultivation of presence, understood as the state of keeping one's attention on what is happening in the

moment, not ruminating about the past or thinking about the future, is a common outcome associated with meditation practice. Research suggests that presence is highly correlated with psychological wellness (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Jon Kabat-Zinn (2018, p.59) utilizes the term *presencing*, as an active, and psychologically adaptive process that can be cultivated through meditation practice. Respondents in the current study provided rich narratives evidencing how their mediation practice improved their ability to become more aware of their present moment experiences.

A fundamental aspect of mindfulness, mindfulness being one of the key psychological products associated with meditation practice, (Bishop et al. 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014), is the development of acceptance. According to Kabat-Zinn (1994), acceptance is an important step in the process of developing healthy habits of mind. Each and every one of the respondents from the current study reported that their meditation practices led to an increased capacity to accept their present moment experiences, as well as their general life circumstances. The respondent responses regarding the development of acceptance, also reflected an increased ability to respond to life in more adaptive ways.

Meditation practice facilitated the development of both a sense of calm and clarity among all respondents. Developments in the areas of calmness and clarity have been associated with mediation practice through previous scientific inquiry (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). An increasing area of concern for higher education are issues related to college students' ability to focus their attention on academic tasks (Murrel, Lester, & Sandoz, 2015). Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) appears to a prevalent condition negatively impacting the academic experiences of college students (Advokat, Lane, & Luo, 2011).

Promising, nascent research findings strongly suggest that mediation practice may increase attentional capacity (Chan & Woollcott, 2007; Jha et al., 2007; Tang, 2014; Tang et al., 2007). As discussed in Chapter 2, ADHD is a growing concern among higher education educators. Prior research has demonstrated that mediation practice may lead to the decrease of ADHD symptoms (Mitchell, McIntyre, English, Dennis, Beckham, & Kollins, 2013). Six of the eight respondents reported that their meditation practiced improved their attentional and focus abilities. The increased ability to better navigate difficult, thoughts, emotions and physiological experiences was an outcome that all eight of the respondents reported as a result of their meditation practice, a finding aligning with previous research highlighting the benefits of meditation practice (Farb et al., 2010; Raes & Williams, 2010).

Perspective-taking, the ability to perceive a situation or understand a concept from an alternative point of view is highly correlated with positive mental health development (Beck, Davis, & Freeman, 2014). Cognitive flexibility is the mechanism involved in such a process. Meditation practice has demonstrated the potential to increase cognitive flexibility capacity (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007; Mathur, Sharma, Balachander, Kandavel, & Reddy, 2021; Pollan, 2019). Every one of the respondents who participated in the current study, revealed that their meditation practice experiences contributed to the development of expanded perspective-taking. Three of the respondents experienced a change in perspective as it relates to their psychological relationship to perceived loneliness. Through meditation practice, Macy, Krystal and Tracy learned how to better cope with feelings of loneliness. Considering the rising concerns of loneliness as experienced by college students (American College Health Association, 2017), it is promising that meditation might serve as practice that helps college students respond to perceived stress in more adaptive ways.

Mindfulness development is associated with psychological wellbeing (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2007; Hoffmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). A significant and reoccurring theme that emerged from all interviews conducted during the current investigation was the fact that meditation practice precipitated the development of mindfulness among each and every one of the respondents. Furthermore, all respondents provided explicit examples of how they were able to incorporate mindfulness in everyday activities, leading to more presencing. Respondents attributed their greater development of present-moment awareness to a wide a variety of positive psychological outcomes outlined above. Lastly, as it pertains to outcomes associated with meditation practice, three of the respondents described a profound increase in awareness of, and connection to the natural world. This finding will be further unpacked in the implications and recommendations section of this chapter.

Understanding the processes and outcomes associated with the varying types of meditation practices is still an area of inquiry needing further investigation according to those who have conducted research in this particular domain (Austin, 2011; Burke, 2012; Manna et al., 2010). The current study generated data that linked certain psychological and physiological experiences, to specific practices. For example, Yasmeen reported that dynamic breathing increased her energy level and improved her focus, thereby improving her learning capacity. Belly breathing on the other hand, supported Yasmeen's sleep hygiene. According to Yasmeen, her experiences with guided imagery meditation practice allowed her to relive positive moments from her childhood, leading to an increased sense of happiness.

Charlie described how his breath awareness practice improved his awareness, leading to less mind-wandering and an increased ability to focus his attention. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that meditation practices falling into the focused-attention

category, breath awareness included, improve one's ability to recognize when the mind is wandering and resettle attention back onto an intended object and/or task (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). Peyton also reported that their breath awareness meditation practice led to improved focus. In terms of meditation practice timing, there is a dearth of research that investigates the different outcomes associated with certain meditation schedules, in particular morning versus evening meditation sessions.

Forrest described how his meditation practice in the evening was a qualitatively different experience than his morning meditation, "During that practice, it's effortless for me to enter into some quiet, more quieted state." Peyton stated that their evening meditations "tend not to go as well, but are still productive." They elaborated, sharing that after busy days that include emotionally charged experiences during their workday, it can be difficult to calm the mind. Forrest and Peyton's qualitative experiences during evening meditations appear to be opposite in nature. This is an area that should be further explored.

There were also some outlier findings that emerged, experiences that were not common occurrences across the majority of respondents, deserving of further discussion. Forrest, Krystal, Tracy and Macy all described associations between nature and their meditation practices. Forrest articulated the importance of nature in relation to his meditation practice in two distinct ways. One, he expressed how meditation practice increased his awareness and connection to nature while in natural settings, and two, his meditation practice increased his gratitude and love of nature. Krystal explained her hikes in natural settings were meditative experiences, describing how her increased mindfulness due to meditation practice improved her connection to the natural world. Macy described a two particular moments in nature, when the experience was profoundly meditative. She also characterized her evening garden watering, as her evening meditation

practice. Tracy described how a walking meditation experience created a sense of liberation, through an increased awareness of the natural world:

> I did a walking meditation and noticed the crispness of the air, the crackling of the gravel under my feet and I stopped dead in my tracks. I noticed water, a babbling brook, and felt some freed up channels or freedom.

The accounts above reflecting a relationship between meditation and an increased connection to, and an appreciation of the natural world are intriguing discoveries. Previous studies strongly suggest that mindfulness development through meditation practice is correlated with positive ecological behavior (Barbaro & Pickett, 2015; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Geiger, Otto & Schrader, 2018). The current study adds to this body of literature, while strengthening the argument that meditation practice might be a catalyst in pro-environmentalism behavior.

A singular and intriguing finding involved Krystal, who expressed that her meditation practice led to self-discovery, and according to Krystal, this self-reflection led to her becoming more social justice-minded. Although more and more research is emerging linking meditation to the development increased empathy and compassion toward others (Dahl, Lutz and Davidson, 2015), there is a paucity of research focused on how meditation can contribute to social justice-mindedness specifically. This finding, along with the data that emerged related to the nature-meditation connection, will be further discussed in the recommendations section of this chapter.

A major critique of the current scientific literature on meditation practice is that there has not been enough inquiry to how meditation might lead to negative psychological outcomes (Irving et al., 2009). However, there has been research that has produced results implicating meditation practice in the development of poor mental health outcomes (Burrows, 2017; Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton & Ridge, 2014). Studies focused on the experiences of college student meditators have produced results suggesting that some meditators who come to the

practice with preexisting mental health conditions, might be particularly susceptible to developing unhealthy psychological states Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton & Ridge, 2014). Although such studies are small in number, these findings generate concerns among researchers in the field of meditation inquiry. Burrows' (2017) research results suggest that vulnerable students in particular, may struggle with adopting meditation practice. All eight of the respondents in the current study reported experiencing moderate to severe levels of stress and anxiety during the time of their initial meditation practice experiences. Two of the respondents shared that they had a history of serious, diagnosed mental health challenges. With this in mind, none of the respondents reported experiencing any serious negative psychological outcomes as a result of their meditation practice, rather, their meditation practice alleviated much of the psychological stress they were experiencing at the onset of practice

Although respondents did not experience any serious, psychological side effects as a result of their meditation practice, each and every one of the respondents did report that mind-wandering was a common challenge associated with their meditation practice. However, mind-wandering is considered to be an ingredient necessary to cultivate more awareness and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), and in essence, a necessary catalyst to healthy development. The respondents articulated and embraced this very idea. A perceived lack of time, choosing to participate in other activities and challenging relationship dynamics proved to be regular barriers to meditation practice. An interesting finding in terms of meditation practice barriers was the fact that only one respondent, Toby, explicitly mentioned how socioeconomic factors negatively impacted their meditation practice. I expected this to be a more common factor that would emerge considering community college students have been characterized as a student population

that must navigate socioeconomically related barriers while pursuing their higher education goals.

Lastly, James, Charlie and Yasmeen reestablished practice soon after participating in the study. All three respondents stated that the simple act of being asked about their prior meditation practice experiences, acted as a catalyst in reincorporating meditation practice into their lives. Each of these individuals felt something was not congruent in their lives leading up to the study, and participating in the study led to the awareness that meditation practice had been a helpful tool in the past to negotiate psychological distress. According to the James, Charlie and Yasmeen, involvement in the study reaffirmed the value of meditation in the healthy development of human beings. To me, this is a critical finding in and of itself, as it highlights the fact that guidance and support from a trusted meditation peer or teacher may be the foundational component to the development and maintenance of a community college student's meditation practice.

Conclusions

The overarching research question guiding the study was, "What are the lived experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation?" The overarching research question was addressed by the essence that emerged from the synthesis of data, or shared meaning ascribed to meditation practice by the respondents. The essence of the phenomenon, meditation practice, is presented here: The respondents discovered meditation practice as a result of their desire to alleviate psychological stress - their psychological struggles were the catalysts for the respondents to explore meditation practice.

Psychological stress was an inherent element in the lives of the respondents, and fundamentally shaped their meditation practice experiences. Meditation practice proved

challenging for some in the beginning, whereas some respondents found meditation practice to be quite helpful immediately. Each of the respondents participated in a formal course, taught by a qualified meditation teacher, at some point during their time as a community college student. These formal learning opportunities also provided a space for respondents to connect with peers who supported their meditation practice. Every one of the respondents acknowledged that their participation in a formal meditation course helped them develop their meditation practice in meaningful ways, leading to positive, psychological growth.

Meditation practice contributed to the psychological wellness of respondents in a variety of ways. Respondents universally described how environmental and internal experiences can present barriers to practice that may lead to the slowed progress, or in some cases, abandonment of meditation practice. Lastly, meditation practice precipitates the development of mindfulness, and this mindful awareness is applied outside of formal meditation practice, showing up for respondents during their day-to-day experiences.

The first secondary research question guiding the inquiry was, "What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices?" The respondents provided rich data that addressed this secondary research question. All eight of the respondents experienced psychological growth in the following psychological domains: (1) Increased awareness; (2) increased capacity for acceptance; (3) increased sense of calm; (4) improved mental clarity; (5) increased capacity to navigate difficult thoughts and emotions; (6) improved ability to take on different perspectives, and (7) improved mindfulness. Six of the eight respondents shared that their attentional and concentrative abilities improved as a result of their meditation practice.

The secondary research question was, "What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students?" The first theme emerging from the data that addresses this question relates to the conditions that led respondents to explore meditation practice in the first place. Universally shared among respondents, psychological distress motivated them to explore meditation practice as a therapeutic tool. Also, the kinds of meditation practices utilized by the respondents influenced their meditation practice experiences. For example, Charlie shared that walking and eating meditations were not pleasant experiences for him, however; the breath awareness meditation approach led to self-reported, positive psychological outcomes, including improved mental clarity, awareness and mindfulness.

Intellectual knowledge, books, TED Talks and videos on the internet, shaped the meditation practice experiences for six of the respondents. Nature played a significant role in contributing to the meditation practice experience for six of the respondents as well. Participating in a formal meditation course, involving a community of peer meditators and an experienced teacher, positively contributed to the development and sustainability of the each and every one of the respondents' meditation practice. Respondents also articulated conditions that influenced their meditation practice experiences in terms of challenges to practice. Respondents reported that lack of time, competing activities, social relationships and mind-wandering were barriers to developing and sustaining meditation practice.

Based on the respondent data above, nascent research questions emerged:

- What are some fundamental elements that make a formal mediation course effective in supporting the development of meditation practice among community college students?
- What are the psychological experiences associated with particular mediation practices?
- In what ways does meditation practice contribute to pro-environmental behavior?

- In what ways does meditation practice contribute to social-justice advocacy behavior?
- In what ways do sociocultural factors impact the meditation experiences of community college students?

Implications

Community colleges are gateways to higher educational opportunities and serve as catalysts for social upward mobility through career technical education (CTE) training, especially for socioeconomic disadvantaged and minoritized student populations (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012). Although community colleges represent a vehicle of opportunity, the obstacles that community college students face are many. In light of the substandard student success rates associated with community colleges, it is vitally important for community college educators and leaders to better understand the obstacles community college students must navigate along their education journey. One such barrier to academic success, poor mental health is a growing concern for community college professionals, policymakers and for the students themselves (American College Counseling Association, 2010; Reetz, Barr & Krylowicz, 2014). Institutionalized health and wellness support for students in the form of mental health counseling services is lacking at many community colleges (Epstein, 2015; Reetz, Barr & Krylowicz, 2014).

Further exacerbating the issue of psychological distress experienced by many community college students, is the lack of access to community-based mental health services that many community college students experience. Meditation practice is no panacea, however, such a practice might serve as an educational opportunity that teaches community college students

how to cultivate psychological wellness (Britt, Pribesh, Hinton-Johnson, & Gupta, 2017; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014).

The current study highlighted how meditation practice might support the healthy psychological development of students in a variety of ways – increased awareness, improved focus and attention, development of calmness and clarity, and the cultivation of mindfulness. Two emerging discoveries uncovered during the study are of particular interest: The facilitation of perspective-taking and the increased ability to cope with loneliness. The ability to shift perspective is a highly adaptive skill that is associated with psychological wellness (Beck, Davis, & Freeman, 2014), and is a necessary cognitive and emotional ability that college students need to develop as they must negotiate increasing complex living conditions. Loneliness is becoming an increasing mental health issue among college students (American College Health Association, 2017). Meditation training has the potential to address these critical areas of healthy human development.

Meditation and mindfulness can be taught and offered to community college students in a variety of ways. Some community colleges offer formal courses within their psychology departments. For example, a community college in northern California, offers a course titled The Psychology of Meditation. The course is one of the most popular courses at the college, however, it has limited offerings and therefore only serves a small portion of students per semester. Courses such as these could be built into the curriculum at community colleges, or in the case of the example above, existing courses can be expanded. Workshops that are not semester-long, credit-bearing courses might serve as a space that introduces students to meditation practice, while connecting students with peers who may represent a community of

meditators. Fundamental elements established through formal instructional opportunities include formal teaching by a qualified meditation teacher, and the presence of community. The respondents from the current study expressed time and time again, that formal instruction from a knowledgeable teacher was critical in developing and maintaining their meditation practice. Furthermore, learning amongst a community of meditators was a critical and positive contributing factor to their meditation practice experience.

There are existing models in place, such as the Koru Mindfulness program that utilizes a research-based mindfulness and meditation curriculum, consisting of four, one hour and fifteen-minute classes. The recommended class size for this course is 10-15 students, and participants enrolled in the course have access to a meditation app. The Koru Mindfulness curriculum was developed specifically to serve college students. Four of the eight respondents from this study have participated in the Koru program, and credited the Koru Mindfulness course as a major reason for their positive meditation practice experiences.

Climate change is devasting the planet. As a prime example, California is in the midst of an urgent climate crisis. Increasingly dry years are leading to wildfires that are decimating large geographical spaces in the state, and fundamentally altering the lives of the people that live in these areas. A collective response is necessary to address the climate crisis in California, and globally. A growing area of inquiry that is integrating social science and environmental science, has begun a research movement focusing on how mindfulness and meditation practice contributes to environmentalism (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Barbaro & Pickett, 2015; Geiger, Otto

& Schrader, 2018). Forrest, Macy, Tracy and Krystal all provided rich data illustrating how their meditation practice facilitated a greater connection to, and appreciation of, the natural world. Therefore, expanding a meditation curriculum into community colleges may go far beyond individual wellness, it has the potential to contribute to collective wellness, through far reaching ecological behavioral change.

Along the lines of ecological activism as outlined above, the social, racial and economic injustices that are leading to the deterioration of individual and community mental health must be addressed (Teo, 2015; Fox, Prillettensky & Austin, 2009). One of the respondents from the current study Krystal, provided an intriguing account regarding how her meditation practice contributed to her pursuit of activism. To me this is not merely an outlier finding, it is a profound discovery that can expanding upon and utilized to build a formalized, community-based curriculum that promotes social justice via the cultivation of mindfulness and meditation practice.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings from the current research study, the following sections provide recommendations and accompanying rationale for additional research in particular areas of meditation practice inquiry. There remains a paucity of research focused on the meditation practice experiences of community college students. The findings presented in this study suggest that meditation practice contributes to the healthy psychological development of community college students. However, with a respondent sample of only eight community college students, broad generalizations cannot be made. The nascent research and promising outcomes from studies focused on the meditation practice experiences of community college students is an indication of need for further qualitative, exploratory research in this area.

As previously stated, a research question that should be further investigated is, in what ways do sociocultural factors impact the meditation experiences of community college students? My recommendation is that the experiences of diverse groups of community college students who practice meditation are more closely investigated utilizing a case study approach, specifically the instrumental case (Creswell, 2013). My recommendation is to conduct instrumental case studies focused on the meditation experiences of community college students who represent various minoritized and marginalized student groups. African American males for example, are receiving more attention in terms of psychological stress and trauma, and thus, an instrumental case study exploring how their meditation experiences impact their psychological health is a worthy research endeavor.

Focusing on the specific meditation practices, such as breath awareness, body scans, open-monitoring methods, and connecting these particular practices to specific psychological outcomes is an additional, future research endeavor that would add to the literature in meaningful ways. The current study did not explicitly focus on how different meditation practices precipitated particular psychological outcomes. Such an omission is a critical one, as meditation practice represents a variety of different practices, some involving different psychological and physiological mechanisms. The current study shed light on how particular meditation practices influence specific domains of psychological development. However, there needs be further investigation into the particular meditation methods that community college students utilize, and how these practices impact the specific cognitive and emotional aspects of psychological experience. For example, what meditation practices are helpful in coping with feelings of loneliness? To this end, it is my recommendation that further phenomenological research be

conducted within the community college student population utilizing the Micro-phenomenological Interview (MpI).

In a previous research study, Pryzembel and Singer (2018) utilized Micro-phenomenological Interviews to assess the experiences of meditators during their use of three distinct meditation techniques, breath awareness, observing-thought and loving kindness meditation practices. According to the results of the study, the three meditation techniques were associated with differential affective, physiological and sensory experiences associated with the respective meditation techniques (See figure 3). Conducting similar research involving the community college student population could provide incredible insights into what practices lead to particular positive psychological health outcomes among community college students.

A couple of interesting findings emerged from the current study that also elicit further research. One, all eight respondents stated that meditation practice changed their perspective and perceptions in ways that fundamentally altered how they navigate life. Research suggests that the ability to gain perspective is an adaptive quality, leading to positive mental health outcomes. Understanding how perspective-taking can be cultivated in adaptive ways needs further investigation within the context of meditation practice. Along the lines of perspective shifts, one respondent articulated that, on multiple occasions, meditation practice contributed to their altered relationship to thoughts and emotions associated with addiction in ways that promoted sober living. Such a finding is promising, as addiction and substance abuse are barriers to the success and wellbeing of many community college students. There are existing therapy and addiction support modalities were designed based on mindfulness and meditation science. However, I believed that further research should be conducted in the area of meditation and addiction recovery.

Globally, mental health is becoming an increasing concern. Focusing on the U.S. specifically, many health and policy experts are expressing their concerns as it pertains to mental wellness, and many are characterizing the current situation as a mental health crisis. These are not merely intuitive responses, rather the recognition based on data that more and more people are reporting that they are experiencing poor mental health. Meditation represents one possible method for addressing psychological wellbeing. It is an approach to mental wellness that has garnered much attention and interest from mental health professionals, educators, policy makers, and most importantly, from individuals who are looking for a way to negotiate complex living conditions that precipitate what Jon Kabat Zinn refers to, as dis-ease (Kabat-Zinn, 2018).

A particular area of mental dis-ease that needs to be addressed is loneliness. Loneliness plagues the general population, however, college students are particularly susceptible to loneliness based on a slew of factors. The current study facilitated discoveries of how meditation practice helped respondents change their psychological relationship to perceived loneliness. I implore the health sciences to further explore how meditation practice might contribute to the adoption of more adaptive thoughts, emotions and behaviors toward loneliness. Also, research into how perspective-taking can be cultivated in more expansive ways through meditation practice is to me, a critically important area for growth. Along these lines, I hope to see more research into how compassion-based meditation practices impact the healthy development of individuals and communities.

Lastly, considering the global realities that exist – climate change, structural and individual racism, police brutality practices among communities of color, gun violence, and a host of other urgent crisis, it is worthwhile to look at how meditation practice can cultivate a self-awareness, that leads to a fundamental shift in perspective that in turn may contribute to a more

expansive view of the world for those who practice meditation, or any other contemplative practice. Not to say that meditation is a panacea, it clearly is not. That said, the neurological, psychological and behavioral research cannot be ignored – meditation is indeed a mechanism that can contribute to individual and collective positive, behavioral changes. Thus, I argue that further research needs to be conducted with a focus on how meditation practice can cultivate a sense of activism and service addressing any and all of the concerns mentioned above. Let Krystal's lived experience, captured by her quote in the beginning of this chapter, be a reminder of what is possible.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION LETTER

Hello,

You have been identified as a potential respondent for my research study titled, Investigating the Lived Experiences of Community College Students Who Have Practiced Meditation.

Overview:

The purpose of the study is to investigate the experiences of community college students who have practiced meditation, with a particular focus aimed at exploring how meditation contributes to the psychological wellbeing of students who have practiced meditation. This will be a qualitative study, utilizing one-to-one interviews. Each respondent will participate in 2 interviews, with the potential of a third interview being utilized for clarification purposes. Each interview will be scheduled for 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted through the Zoom online meeting platform due to current pandemic, ensuring the safety of respondents. Interviews will be recorded on a digital device, as well as the through the recording feature of Zoom.

Respondent Criteria:

Individuals are eligible to participate in the study if (1) they are a current or former community college student; and (2) have practiced meditation.

Interested students should contact Bobby Withrow-Clark at (530) 895-2306 or at withrow-clarkro@butte.edu.

Warmly,

Bobby Withrow-Clark

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

Investigating the Lived Experiences of Community College Students Who Practice Meditation

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve a qualitative research design exploring the experiences of community college students who practice meditation.

My name is Robert Withrow-Clark and I am a Benerd College doctoral student at the University of the Pacific. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you meet the respondent criteria for the study.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the shared experiences of community college students who practice meditation. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire that will determine if you do in fact meet the criteria to participate in the study. If you meet the criteria, you will be asked to participate in two, one-to-one interviews with the researcher, each scheduled for one hour. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews will be held remotely through Zoom and recorded. It is anticipated that your participation in this study will last two to three months, but this may vary depending on the data collection efforts.

There are some possible risks involved for participants.

Risks may include:

- Uncovering some challenging thoughts and emotions when recalling your experiences as a meditator

There are some benefits to this research.

Potential benefits may include:

- Learning how to utilize meditation as a tool to develop psychological wellness, which may include aspects of decreases in stress and anxiety, improved concentration, memory and sleep quality
- Feeling accomplished as a contributor to the research on meditation and how it may lead to program and policy changes that incorporate meditation as a means to contribute to the positive psychological development of community college students

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at **(916) 375-9926**. You can also email me at: **r_withrowclark@u.pacific.edu.** You may also contact Dr. Tom Nelson, my dissertation chair with questions or concerns regarding the study. He can be reached at **tnelson@pacific.edu.** If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Research & Graduate Studies Office, University of the Pacific (209) 946-

7716. In the event of a research-related injury, please advise us, and then contact your regular medical provider and bill through your normal insurance carrier.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality include using pseudonyms in the dissertation, protecting the identity of respondents. The researcher vows to not share your personal information with anyone else outside of the interviews. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time with out penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

(If applicable, give information on how to obtain the results of the study.)

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature Date

_____ _____

APPENDIX C: POTENTIAL RESPONDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

Name: Age: Gender:

1. Please briefly describe your experiences with meditation.

2. Please tell me about the frequency and patterns of your meditation practice. How often, and for how long do you usually meditate?

3. Describe the types of meditation practices you utilize (mindfulness meditation, breath-awareness meditation, etc.).

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW ONE PROTOCOL

Overarching Researching Question:
What are the lived experiences of community college students who practice meditation?

Secondary Research Question 1:
What are the psychological effects associated with community college students' meditation practices?

Secondary Research Question 2:
What contexts or situations influence the meditation practice experiences of community college students?

Rapport Building Dialogue:
Thank you for being part of this important study. I appreciate you taking time to spend with me talking about meditation and how it has affected your life.

How long have you been attending [insert school]? What are your college and overall goals?

How's school been going for you?

Interview Questions:

Please tell me about your meditation practice.

Tell me about the time in your life that you chose to start thinking about the idea of learning meditation practice.

What was it like for you at the beginning of your meditation practice?

Talk about how others in your circles reacted to your decision to begin practicing meditation.

In what ways did you describe to others why you began meditating?

Tell me a little about your experiences outside the classroom.

Talk to me in as much detail as you can about one of those important experiences.

So, now tell me more about your meditation practice.

- How often?
- How long?
- Kind of meditation practice.
- Challenges.

Talk to me about how you have changed since you began meditating.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW TWO PROTOCOL

Rapport Building Dialogue:

"How have you been?"

"How is school/life going since we last spoke?'

Interview Questions:

What are some things that you would say all meditation practitioners have in common?

When was the last time you had a meditation session? Tell me about that session, from beginning to end, in as much detail as you can remember.

Think back to your earliest meditation sessions? What lessons have you learned over time that have contributed to you continuing to meditate today?

Tell me about one of your earliest meditation sessions.

Tell me about one of your more recent meditation sessions.

If you were a teacher leading a class on beginning meditation, what would be some of the most fundamental and important aspects for you to share with your students?

What else would you like to share with me about your meditation practice and what you have learned about yourself and others as a result?