

Introduction

- Centering Prayer is an ancient Christian Spiritual Practice, rediscovered in the 1960s
- Most similar to mindfulness meditation; a discipline of nondiscursive silence, openness, receptivity (not conventional 'talk' prayer!)
- Similar immediate practice effects to types of Buddhist Meditation (Knabb, 2012) (Asbill, 2015)
- "A process of inner transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union. One's way of seeing reality changes in the process. A restructuring of consciousness takes place." (Keating, 2006)
- Our research question: Is there a deepening of experience for centering prayer practitioners over time? What are the long term practice effects of centering prayer?

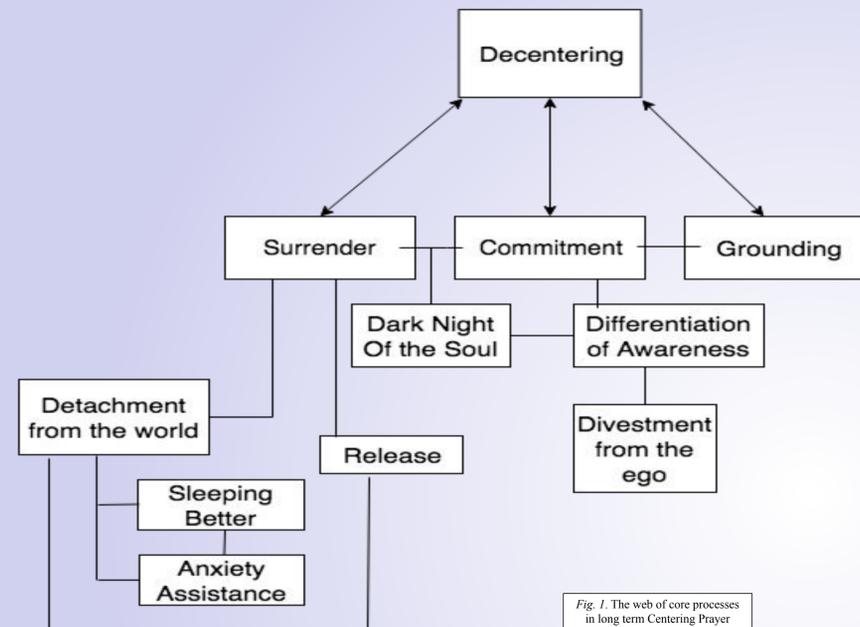
Practicing Centering Prayer *

- Step One: Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within
- Step Two: Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within
- Step Three: Whenever you become aware of your thoughts, return to the sacred word
- Step Four: At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes

Methods

- Three sets of one hour long interviews; 13 fixed questions, open-ended discussion
- Compared accounts of a two year practitioner, a ten year practitioner, and a twenty-three year practitioner
- 2 Female, 1 Male participants; two were members of a prayer group, one independent practitioner
- Applied deductive and inductive thematic analysis across interviews

Results



Ten themes were inductively identified, and organized in the above web (fig.1), a corresponding legend is presented beside it (fig. 2). Decentering, the highest point on the graph, is identified as the core process of Centering Prayer: this term emerged inductively from our interviews, in how we interpreted the experience to be deepening in the practitioners, what Keating refers to as Inner Transformation. The graph is constructed with the most subordinate themes at the lower end, being more noticeable practice effects of centering prayer. For example Anxiety Reduction, Sleeping Better, relate to a sense of Detachment from the world. These relate to the higher themes of Surrender, Commitment, and Grounding, three essential aspects of contemplative practice.

Two Year Practitioner: Expressed "A need to interact with others in Centering Prayer. A point in the practice where she wants to judge how well the practice is going" (Field Note Amendment)

Ten Year Practitioner: "It may just be that I have not got a lot of expectation or imagination...these lovely experiences of God that a lot of people seem to have, I don't seem to have. I'm not troubled by the feeling of dryness, or that prayer isn't working anymore, or 'where has God gone?'"

Twenty Three Year Practitioner: "I find that as soon as I sit, I don't think anymore. I'm locked up somewhere. As soon as I sit, it's full meditation. ...It's a new thing, but I'm glad I'm here!"

* Practicing Centering prayer: taken from Contemplative Outreach brochure, developed by Thomas Keating

Discussion

- The thematic analysis of the qualitative descriptions by practitioners at different stages of practice, displayed a significant difference that we ascribe to practice effects, that evidence a deepening of experience. Based on their descriptions, we inductively derived that this deepening was a "decentering", in terms of, a divestment from the ego, a surrender into a non-ego centered basis of awareness.
- This project showed qualitative differences in most of these categories between our three practitioners, and a qualitative difference in all categories between the senior and junior practitioners.
- Evidence of how "The emotional programs of early childhood that are buried in your unconscious begin to emerge into clear and stark awareness" (Keating, 2006)
- The core process of decentering is how we described the deepening of experience.
- There are notable parallels between our core process of decentering, Keating's (2006) characterization of "inner transformation", and Brown & Engler's (1986) 15-year longitudinal study describing the practice effects of meditation as a "systematic deconstruction" of consciousness
- The primary limitations of this study involve the inability to distinguish between what would be an actual practice effect, compared with what may be a difference of culture, gender, race, or age.

References

- Asbill (2015) *Spiritually Oriented Interventions: Comparing Mindfulness and Centering Prayer as Interventions for Anxiety Reduction*. ProQuest: Ann Arbor, MI.
- Brown, D., & Engler, J. (1986). The stages of mindfulness meditation: A validation study. Part I: Study and results. In K. Wilber, J. Engler, & D. Brown (Eds.), *Transformation of consciousness: Conventional and contemplative perspectives on human development* (pp. 161–191). Boston: Shambhala.
- Fox, J., Gutierrez, D., Haas, J., Braganza, D., & Berger, C. (2015). A phenomenological investigation of centering prayer using conventional content analysis. *Pastoral Psychology*, 64, 803–825.
- Keating, T. (2006). *Open mind, open heart: The contemplative dimension of the Gospel*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Knabb, J. (2012). Centering Prayer as an Alternative to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression Relapse Prevention. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51, 908 – 924.

THEME	DESCRIPTION
1. Decentering	The core process of moving away from an ego centered attitude
2.A Surrender	The aspect of being able to let go: essential to decentering
2.B Commitment	The aspect of will that is able to show consistency in continuing with the prayer through/with/ despite the decentering experience
2. C Grounding	Development of awareness of a base or source or context, outside or beyond, ego-awareness (largely not articulated)
3.A "Dark Night of the Soul"	The feeling of spiritual dryness or abandonment, described by St. John of the Cross
3. B Differentiation of Awareness	Increased ability to distinguish between ego-centric attitude and non-egocentric awareness of events
3. C Detachment from the World	Having less 'care' in the world. Feeling as though things are less important, or don't hinge on you as much.
4. Divestment from the Ego	Articulation of experience without ego being invested in events or their quality
5.A Release	Related to letting go of emotions, as well as conscious psychological phenomena: Observed across all three practitioners
5.B Sleeping Better	Being able to sleep better at night. Associated with mindfulness: observed across all three practitioners
5.C Anxiety Assistance	Clear reports of lowered stress. Associated with mindfulness practices: observed across all three practitioners

Fig. 2. Corresponding legend for fig 1.