

Is there a Deepening of experience in Centering Prayer?

Interviewing Centering Prayer Practitioners

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Abstract

The retrieval of traditional Christian contemplative practices such as centering prayer has continued steadily since the 1960s, although research into the effects of centering prayer has not kept pace. This study aimed to describe the practice effects of centering prayer through a comparative qualitative analysis of the accounts of three practitioners at different stages of practice (two, ten, and twenty-three years). Our hypothesis was that a “deepening” of experience will occur based on length of practice. Individual interviews were conducted using a fixed set of questions to initiate open-ended discussion. Using the fixed questions as categories enabled deductive thematic analysis comparatively across the three interviews, alongside an inductive reading of the content for themes outside the question categories. Acknowledging the serious limitations of the study, nevertheless suggestive confirmation of the “deepening” hypothesis was obtained that was also consistent with the literature on centering prayer and on meditation more broadly.

Introduction

Centering prayer is a non-discursive practice, that cultivates non-thinking awareness. It shares many similarities to other meditative and mindfulness practices. It's an ancient form of Christian Contemplation, practiced for many centuries as part of the Christian tradition, and was re-popularized in the 1970's by Trappist monks Thomas Keating, William Menninger, and Basil Pennington. Since its revitalization as an active spiritual practice, it has become widespread with about 150,000 practitioners globally (Ferguson, 2010). Thomas Keating provides a four step method to practicing Centering Prayer, with it's one of its primary purposes being '*as 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, 2002).

1. Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. 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.
3. Whenever you become aware of your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes. (Keating, 2002)

Keating recommends practicing centering prayer twice a day, in twenty minute segments. The growing popularity of centering prayer is dwarfed in contrast by the growing popularity of mindfulness practices and meditation. The overlap between Centering Prayer and other mindfulness practices and meditation are beginning to be documented: Knabb found that Centering Prayer helps western Christians in hospital care receive the same benefits as the documented effects of Buddhist or other non Christian mindfulness practices, without the practitioners having to feel uneasy about compromising their religious values (Knabb, 2012). Asbill compared centering prayer to mindfulness, and found them equally effective for stress reduction (Asbill, 2015). Yet, at the present, there are only a handful of scholarly studies of Centering prayer (Fox, et al. 2015), and two doctoral dissertations (Kruse, 2012) (Kuiper, 2005). In contrast, “*There has been explosive growth in the rate of published mindfulness research, expanding from less than a dozen articles a year prior to 1998 to almost 500 per year by 2012.*” (Waelde & Thompson, 2016). *A Revolution in interest in meditation has taken place over the last 15 years* (West, 2016). From this, we infer that based on the similarities between mindfulness meditations, and centering prayer, as well as the incredible discrepancies in the amount of published works, that research into centering prayer must be continued.

The two papers we presented earlier in justification for our position on the similarities between centering prayer and Meditation (Knabb, 2012; Asbill, 2015) both deal with immediately visible practice effects. These are effects that appear after a few weeks of practice. Knabbs’ study was conduct over eight weeks; a different study on meditation conducted by Fredrickson found that love and kindness meditation increased positive emotions after nine weeks (Fredrickson et.al, 2008). The studies that do exist about centering prayer, and even in the larger domain of mindfulness, predominantly focus on immediate practice effects. The absence of research in the non immediate practice effects, led us to our interest, and our research question, in understanding the long term practice effects of centering prayer. Is there a deepening of experience for centering prayer practitioners?

The original source material, largely consisting of revitalized ancient texts, and books written by Thomas Keating, provide a framework for what we can expect the long term effects to be.

Divine Therapy, and Divine Center

Keating begins his prescription of centering prayer by suggesting that we have all experienced some form of emotional trauma that has created an impact in our psychological self. The damage inflicted by this emotional trauma on our psychological self, is responsible for the creation of our attachments, our dislikes, and our automatic programs. These are our emotional programs for happiness. (Keating, 2012). These programs are reinforced, and eventually seem like automatic aspects of what make us who we are. Keating believes that centering prayer is a way in which one is released from these subconscious automatic programs/traumas, and rediscovers their divine center, and as such, is healed from these psychological traumas.

The divine center is the namesake for centering prayer (Fox, et.al, 2015). Thomas Merton, who was an inspiration to Keating and other Trappists, summated it famously:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.

It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely...I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (Merton, 1968)

The primary purpose of centering prayer as understood from the original literature, is to make us aware of our automatic emotional programs that have been created and enforced through emotional traumas we have all experienced. By being made aware of these automatic emotional programs, we are able to release them, and center ourselves in Christ, who is at the center of our being. To decenter ourselves from our false, ego-centered selves, and through this process, re-center in our true selves, of which Christ is at the center.

The preferred way to study long term practice effects of any discipline would be in a longitudinal study conducted over many years. Based on the available resources, and temporal limitations we

were facing, we concluded the best study we could conduct would be looking at practitioners at different stages, and inferring the deepening of experience through independent interviews.

We can now see the necessity of our research question for the relevant field. If what Keating, Merton, and the ancient monks wrote are correct, we would hope to be able to qualitatively see these process in action. This experience, which we have termed deepening, would be identifiable in the responses and inductive analysis of our practitioners (who are all at different stages of practice) responses to our interview questions.

Methods

This study set out to explore the deepening of experience of centering prayer practitioners. A questionnaire of thirteen open response questions was created, with the intention of deductively and inductively analyzing the responses across our three practitioners of various stages. The questions can be found in Appendix A, and consist of two items. Item 1) consists of examples of the questions, and item 2) consists of a checklist of statements on topics the researcher wanted to address. The researcher was responsible for assuring that to the best of their abilities, that at the end of the interview all twelve points in item 2) were addressed in some capacity. These fixed questions formed our deductive themes, and were analyzed based on our practitioner's responses. What was focused on, were the inductive themes that emerged across all three interviews, with the hope that we would be able to see the deepening of experience.

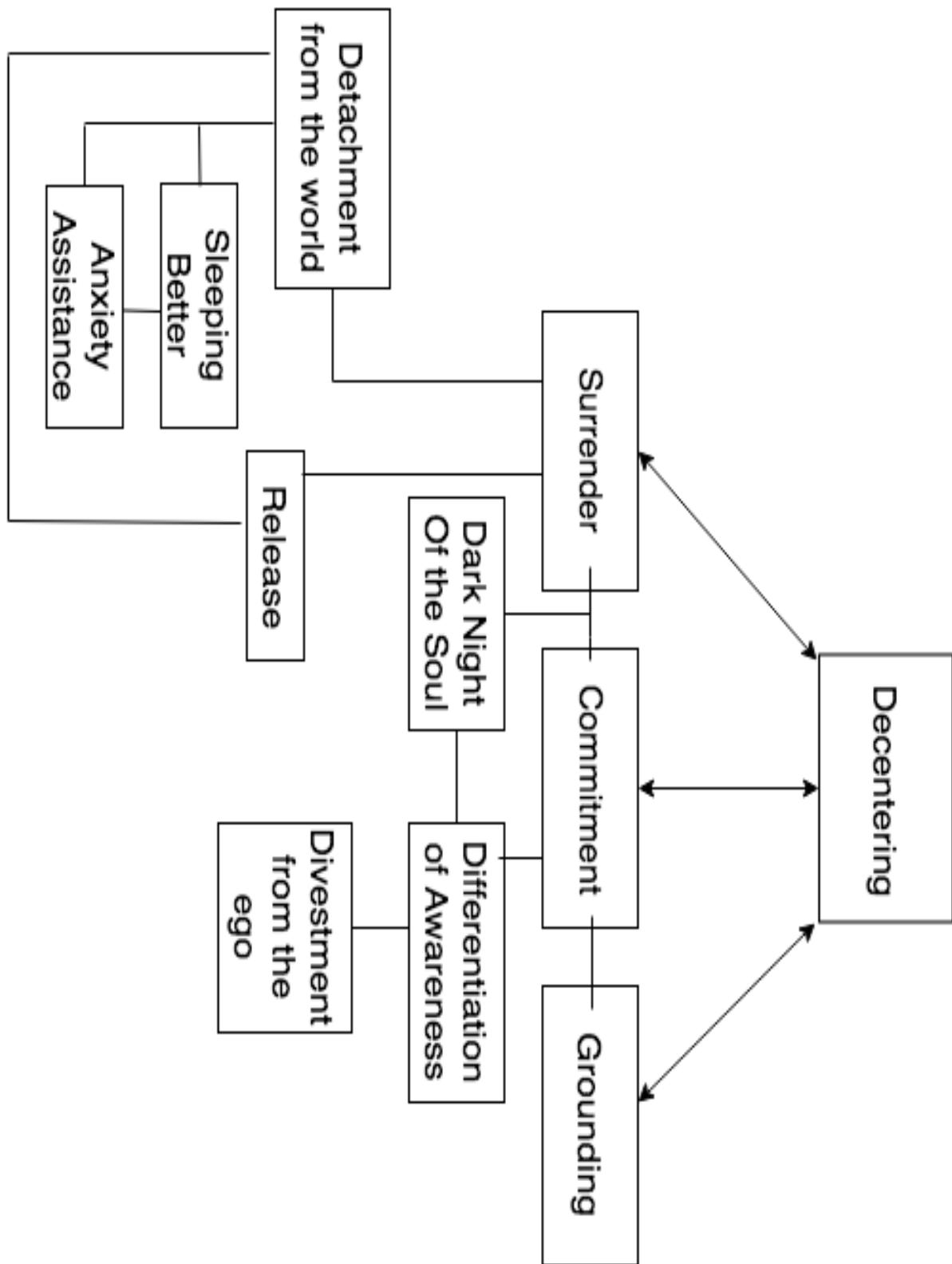
Our three practitioners were all centering prayer practitioners at various lengths of practice: two years, ten years, and twenty-three years. Two were recruited from a local centering prayer group, and one was a friend of the researchers. Two participants were Caucasian Canadian women, and one was a Nigerian man. The interviews using the thirteen questions lasted one hour on average. The interviews were transcribed by the researchers, and qualitatively analyzed using NVivo software, and traditional analysis.

Threats to Validity

A weakness of small scale research into experiential fields, is twofold. First, there is the obvious issue that what we may be attributing as a deepening, may actually be a difference based on

cultural, religious, or personal backgrounds that are utterly unrelated in attributing the phenomenon observed to centering prayer. For example, while our most senior practitioner laughed more than the other two participants, and while this is consistent with the literature, it could also simply be a product of his upbringing, and completely unrelated to the practice. This could be controlled for better by conducting a longitudinal study over many years. It could also be controlled for by having further research conduct similar interviews, which would then increase the sample size and validity.

Secondly, there is a form of conformation bias at play, where as researchers we entered looking for an experience of deepening. This does affect our ability as qualitative researchers, to fairly analyze the transcriptions. Acknowledging this, we still believe that what was uncovered from the transcriptions is in keeping with the literature on meditative and mindfulness practices, as well as centering prayer.



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 being able to show consistency in the decentering experience (prayer)
2. C Grounding	Being able to ‘replant’ yourself in the process once removed from a ego centered attitude
3. A Dark Night of the Soul	The phenomena of spiritual dryness or abandonment, described by St. John of the Cross
3. B Differentiation of Awareness	The ability to, by being focused in the present, but aware of the world.
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	A process of commitment, where the self decenters from itself, resulting in a wide variety of phenomena.
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	Associated with mindfulness practices

Findings

The inductive thematic analysis was organized into a hierarchy of codes, with a core process being defined as Decentering. This table was created after the codes were identified, and was

chosen as the core process from the understanding and development of subordinate codes. The Hierarchy is visible on page seven, and the table on page eight.

The further down our hierarchy a code is, the more subordinate it is, with a direct relation to the higher codes above it. The row of Surrender, Commitment, and Grounding, are considered superior themes, which as they directly develop, or deepen, help create the core process of centering prayer found in decentering. Everything then, in our hierarchy, relates to the core process of Decentering. Each code was inductively identified, with the exception of Dark Night of the Soul, which was addressed on our questionnaire, and thus has a deductive element to it. The bulk of this paper will be presenting quotes to justify the existence and interrelated aspect of this hierarchy.

Anxiety Assistance and Sleeping Better

These are both the most subordinate themes on our hierarchy, and relate to changes that can be observed easily through practice.

And I've just discovered sometimes I'll look back on a day or a week, or a stretch of time, and I'll think 'wow, you know, I just realized before I started this practice, I would've been crying, I would've been um, not sleeping, I would've been freaking out, I would've been really grumpy, and I'm not nearly as much as I was before! (Two Year Practitioner)

...being able to cope with anxiety better, more effectively, and just kind of a growing trust, I feel like I've really grown, I feel like I've grown in my faith... (Two Year Practitioner)

It also helps, and somebody else has said this to me that it has helped them too, if you're lying awake in bed at night, you can practice letting go of thoughts, because probably, it's the stuff going around in your head that's keeping you awake. (Ten Year Practitioner)

Oh, I wasn't sick, I wasn't anything. I wasn't sick, I wasn't anything, but my heart was heavy... Well, my heart was heavy in the sense that people noticed that '(Practitioner)', they tell me 'your heart is burdened, and what is the matter.' And I couldn't explain what the problem might have been. (Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

As subordinate themes, these are not difficult to unpack, or inductively identify across the three interviews. Moreover, these are practice effects that are evident within a few months of practice: all three practitioners, ideally, would be able to report these effects. The more interesting aspect

of anxiety assistance or sleeping better, would relate to how the practitioners came to be involved in centering prayer: was there a spiritual

Detachment from the World

Detachment from the world, is a theme that could inductively be identified as different in the various experiential stages of our practitioners. Detachment from the world is captured by participants' feelings of having less 'care' in the world; feelings of not being tied down to emotions, or things that would otherwise be important to them. We noted a very clear experiential difference between the three practitioners, and how this experience would have deepened.

Centering Prayer has made me care 'less' about the state of the world(.) In a weird sort of way, in the sense that it's helping me, (I'm still not very good at it, but I haven't been practicing it that long), to not carry the whole word on my shoulders all the time. To not immediately feel like if I don't live the right way, the world's going to go to hell in a hand basket.

(Two Year Practitioner)

I find myself more able to be present in the present moment, I think less self concerned and so conscious, certainly more able to let go of anger, and frustration...

(Ten Year Practitioner)

Our most senior practitioner at Twenty-Three years, when asked about his commitment to centering prayer, summed it up very tidily; *Nothing else matters*. It's evident that our three practitioners have begun to detach from things of the world. Detachment from the world, is thoroughly related to another subordinate theme of release.

Release

Where detachment from the world may be the 'action' we can witness, release thematically relates to letting go of other conscious psychological phenomena. It doesn't relate to effable actions, but more to the ineffable changes we can feel or observe in practitioners in our lives. It's more psycho-spiritual than physical or visible.

...that kind of 'upside down' kingdom thing, that the way to flourish is to release power, is to release striving, is to release desire, which I actually realize is starting to sound really Buddhist... (Two Year Practitioner)

We get together and we touch base and we talk about what's going on in our lives and so on, and she did say actually something like, I was describing something to her and she said 'Practitioner), do you hear yourself! You never used to talk that way! Like, that's amazing! You know, something's changed!' and, because, you know, 'you never used to be able to say that about that kind of situation.' And it was a 'oh! Yeah, I guess you're right!'

(Two Year Practitioner)

Thomas Keating is very strong on this, of course, he's past ninety, but that idea that this is 'this is where our lives are going, letting go, letting go.' And you can see that as people age, that this is a necessity. If you're not willing to let go, first of all, of some physical prowess and abilities that you had when you were younger, you're going to have to let go of the big house, you're not going to have your drivers licence probably for your whole life, that this is the way human life goes, I hate to tell you (laughter) This is what's coming!

(Ten Year Practitioner)

Surrender

Our subordinate themes are now summated in a superior theme of Surrender. The themes previously mentioned all demonstrate a level of surrender, which when coupled with the additional superior themes of grounding and commitment to the practice, help the practitioner progress in the process of decentering.

Surrender is a more complex theme than its subordinates, and was inductively identified across all three interviews as a deepening of experience for the practitioners. We attest that our twenty-three-year practitioner is 'farther along' in the experience of surrendering than our two-year practitioner, and we had hoped that we would be able to see this deepening through practice effects.

For me, Centering prayer, the surrender is the same surrender that we see Christ do in Gethsemane and on the cross...He's says 'Into your hands I surrender,' he doesn't just surrender into nothingness, he surrenders into love...that there is something that is good that we all call love, that we call god, not within the creation. It's a mystery. That regular practice of letting go, of releasing, of surrendering, of just saying 'it is what it is.'

(Two Year Practitioner)

But centering prayer is a way of becoming less self dependent, and more God dependent...that's a very good place to go in human life – even those of us who are some foreseeable years from the end of life, this practice of letting go...

(Ten Year Practitioner)

I was telling a friend yesterday, one of our friends, that I was talking to yesterday, knew the other friend. She said '(Practitioner), you're a weakling!' (Laughter) I said, 'Yes, I am a weakling! I am a weakling to the world, maybe in the front of the world, but I am strong in Christ!' ... Because I'm not fighting people, I am a weakling! Because I don't fight back, argue, or do anything, I am a weakling! I would rather be here with them, because that was his teaching! When somebody slaps you on one cheek, give him the other cheek! Don't fight! No need for it! Why did he say love your enemy? Because it doesn't say you're not going to have no enemies. You're not the one who is taking them as enemies, they don't like you, they'll take you as their enemy, it says to love them anyways, because they are the catalyst that will get them to your destiny! That's it! Just follow his teaching! He said 'those who love me are the ones who follow my teaching!' If I want to follow him, I'd better listen. And that's how it is! (Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Surrender then, is identified as an experience that deepens over time. Our two-year practitioner is beginning to notice the changes, our ten-year practitioner is well aware of the changes, and our twenty-three-year practitioner has whole heartedly invested himself in the will of Christ.

The Dark Night of the Soul

The phenomena of the dark night of the soul originated from a 14th century mystic, St. John of the Cross. It refers to a period of spiritual dryness; it's a spiritual crisis that is said to occur when one suddenly and inexplicably feels a sense of separation from god. The paradox of the dark night is that one emerges usually with a stronger faith (Poulain, 1912). While all three of our practitioners are professed Christians of varying denominations, the Dark Night of the Soul as an experiential aspect of Centering Prayer was likely misinterpreted as a question. Rather, it appeared our subjects understood the Dark Night of the Soul as a feeling of spiritual dryness that occurred at some point in their life, including pre contemplative prayer practice. The Dark Night of the Soul was also deductive thematic category.

I'm freaking out about it, and I had an uncle who said to me, you know, you need to trust the process. This is a long and dark and scary journey, but go through the journey. You have people around you who have gone on that journey before you, they still have faith that they're not afraid of the questions. So let them walk with you on the journey. You will come out on the other side someday into the light again. You know, you will be strengthened in your knowledge, in your understanding, in your faith. Just trust that. And that was really helpful! And he was right! At some point, I did sort of just come back, it's a mystery, I don't know how, I don't know why, but you said something like 'the dark night of the soul' being sort of like 'not positive.' But the one thing my uncle didn't tell me was that I would come out into the light and eventually I'd go back into the darkness again, and it would keep happening in cyclical ways in my life...which is

probably a good thing he didn't tell me at the time (laughter). But I know now, you cycle back through that at least, I think, certain kinds of people do, I don't know that everybody does, I think certain kinds of people do, people who think too much, and people who, ask a lot of questions. And, I'm one of those people, and it's a blessing and a curse. And so, for me, the Dark Night of the Soul, is a necessary part, I can't grow without it, in the long run, it's positive.

(Two Year Practitioner)

It's the experience, it's this new, wonderful presence of God, I may be caricaturing it, because my experience has been very different. I've never felt the experience of God to be that kind of lovely, warm, fuzzy embracing kind of thing – but then, as the story is told, what happens after this initial honeymoon period or whatever, then, you feel you find God seems to be absent, and you go into a dry period, which is very different, very troubling, and potentially upsetting and potentially, you'll stop doing whatever practice you've been doing.

(Ten Year Practitioner)

Without the dark night of the soul, you cannot move forward. You have to go through it. And what is the dark night of the soul? You are the soul! As in, you're not a human being. There are two things that leave the body when we die. Two things. The soul, and the mind. This same mind, I just finished talking about reincarnation. When the soul decides to come back, it comes back with the same mind, because the past life experiences is with that mind. And so when we die, it's the mind, and the soul, that moves on. The dark night of the soul, is cleansing.

(Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Divestment of the Ego

The divestment of the Ego is a process we identified in our interviews that involves the ego divesting from itself. While this sounds similar to our core process, decentering is a much more holistic word in keeping with the summation of all our themes, including divestment of the ego. This theme was identified through a question on the interreligious aspects of centering prayer, whether the same thing could be accomplished through other types of meditation.

And so for me, I can't do mindfulness practice or Centering Prayer if what I'm doing is saying 'there's really ultimately nothing, nothing ultimately matters, and everything is ultimately meaningless.' Like, I don't even know if that's what Buddhists really think. But I don't think that, even though, there's always a piece of me that's like 'well what am I doing here, what am I doing with this Centering Prayer,' like, you know, my intention is to be fully in god's presence well, 'what's god, who's god, what does it mean to be in God's presence?' If god is how I conceive of God, god's always there, so it's a matter of me paying attention to the fact that God is always present? I don't know! This is one of my problems with Centering Prayer is I start thinking all these complicated theological thoughts, which then of course I need to release and stop trying to figure out the mystery and just try to be content to be in the mystery

(Two Year Practitioner)

But, I think, it may just be that I have not got a lot of expectation or a lot of imaginations or whatever, but, uh, 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?

(Ten Year Practitioner)

I find lately, 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...I just sit in the chair... It's a new thing. But I'm glad I'm here! (Laughter) because it's another step to a new beginning.

(Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Being aware of our biases and confounds, our twenty-three-year practitioner is the only one that takes the perspective of all these meditative practices having a similar goal. Our two-year and ten-year practitioner both demonstrate some apprehensiveness at saying that centering prayer is not the only way to god. While perhaps they could be correct, the attitude of the twenty-three-year practitioner is indicative of an ego more centered in god, than an ego centered in itself. This is thoroughly in keeping with the literature, and what we could expect the deepening of experience of centering prayer to look like. Our two-year practitioner has been practicing on her own, and felt the need to join a group: while Keating recommends practice in a group, this is still a comparative, and thus, an ego centred measure.

Differentiation of Awareness

The differentiation of awareness relates to the divestment of the ego, as well as the theme of commitment. Where the divestment of the ego is the ability to ‘let go’, differentiation of awareness is to ‘grab on to the good.’ In our three practitioners, we identified a transition to a god dependent life, where as the divestment of the ego proceeds, the differentiation of awareness would be the emotional changes present in the participant.

So that, that practice, that regular practice of letting go, of releasing, of surrendering, of just saying, you know, ‘it is what it is, just trust that in the end, in the big capital S Story, all will be well, even if all is not very well in any sort of way in your life, or in the world, or whatever.

(Two Year Practitioner)

I think I'm certainly more able to be aware of God, and not so much even in the Centering Prayer period, but aware of the presence of God in the natural world, in other people, in situations and the way pieces of situations fit together, the way events fall to, just in all kinds of ways I think I'm more aware of the reality of God...

(Ten Year Practitioner)

No, I've already been practicing, and everything starts from the teaching. And when you follow Christ's teaching, or whatever you follow, then your light starts to shine brighter. And when your light starts to shine brighter, that's when they say God shows up and says 'yeah, he's ready!' And then you're called, and when you're called, then, if you grew up in a Muslim house, I don't know who he hands you to, but I know that if your path is in Christianity, then you are handed over to Christ! But, you must have practiced the teachings. And I have, and I don't know if you believe in the incarnation and all these things, I have the inclination, I have the feeling, that I started this journey in the past life.

(Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Differentiation of awareness is one aspect of commitment, which is the easiest way to identify it as practice effects. The more you're centered in god, the more your actions should indicate it.

Commitment

Commitment is one of our superior themes, and is able to be measured deductively. Inductive inference from it however, is indicative of a much deeper experience based on commitment level. Part of the reason commitment was included as a fixed question, was to address the common bias of commitment against time. A practitioner who has practiced half heartedly for five years, would likely show different results than a practitioner who has practiced passionately for two. Quantitative measures of 'what's your commitment level' can indicate to us what progress in the discipline should look like. Thomas Keating recommends twice daily, for twenty minute sessions. Our two-year practitioner practices faithfully once a day, noting that there are in fact some difficulties with how well she can commit.

I've been interested in it for a long time, but I just have found it really difficult to, it's always this 'well you've got to get up early in the morning so you can make time to practice it, or you need to make some time over the course of your day.' And I've just been really lousy at it. And so I would say I've been interested for a really long time, my commitment has been almost non-existent, and, then, I think it was just... like slowly things started to come more and more frequently together.

If I miss a week, I start noticing it.

(Two Year Practitioner)

Our ten-year practitioner, also has noted some difficulties. Commenting on retirement, it's clear how counter cultural this practice is.

They change, yeah. One of the things you might want to find out, and especially for people who are not retired, just practically speaking, how in the world, can you make this thing work? ... Our society is not set up for that. It just is not. Others I think maybe, but ours, western society, is not. It's counter cultural.

(Ten Year Practitioner)

The twenty-three-year practitioner however, is enormously divested from his ego, enormously differentiated in his awareness towards Christ, and it comes through in his commitment.

I don't do twenty minutes. Minimum, one hour, Maximum two hours. A day. I don't do two sessions. One session, first thing in the morning, I get up three o'clock every morning to do my meditation. It's the most important, and if it's the most important, you have to treat it like it's the most important. I have no other life except it.

(Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Clearly, there is a correlation between commitment, and it raises an interesting avenue for further research: are practitioners who practice with greater heartedness more likely to practice for many years, or is practicing for many years' indicative of practicing with greater heartedness?

Grounding

Grounding is the final superior theme relating to the decentering. It's thoroughly related to commitment, differentiation of awareness, and divestment of the ego. It relates to grounding yourself in the practice, a replanting of yourself after divesting and differentiation in commitment.

I feel like it helps me, you know if you think about being in an ocean, and it's really stormy, and the waves are coming, and you can fight them, and they can get into your face, and your nose, and your mouth, and you choke on them and splutter and stuff, and I feel like Centering Prayer gets me to a place where instead of sort of fighting the waves, you're just kind of 'here comes the wave' and let go, and let the wave pick me up, and drop me back down again. I still go up and down, but it's less painful...

(Two Year Practitioner)

It's not just mental, it's not just articulated believes. It's actual practice. It's in your bones, it's in your body, it's in your psyche, that's not just in an intellectual way.

(Ten Year Practitioner)

*You know you have that bigger power around you, with you, that is pushing everything this way,
that it won't touch you.*

(Twenty-Three Year Practitioner)

Grounding is a choice word, as all practitioners analogized it to a physical experience. Pushing, in your bones, and giving into the waves. All three practitioners experience a form of grounding, that seems to develop as the practice progresses.

The Ineffable Experience

Our hierarchy, for the sake of understanding and organizational structure that assists with understanding, was created as a structural necessity. It provides a framework in which we are able to elaborate on the deepening of certain experiential aspects of centering prayer, and describe the process of decentering as we (and the literature) understand it. Yet, a more correct understanding of decentering would involve all of these themes interrelating with each other, in every capacity. We can see this effect evident in most quotes we select from our transcriptions. There's elements of surrender in grounding, and elements of grounding in surrender. As well, there's elements of anxiety assistance in the divestment of the ego, and elements of the divestment of the ego in anxiety assistance. Our selected quotations best highlight the thematic aspect we have selected them for, but there's enough overlap that a good argument could be made for them to appear in a different thematic category.

This is what Keating, and other primary pieces of literature refer to as the ineffability of the experience. The core process of centering prayer can be defined, and its theoretical structure can be qualified: yet the experiential aspect of it, in a grand sense, tends to defy explanation. Our three practitioners all attested to this experience, and being comfortable in unknowing.

This is one of my problems with Centering Prayer is I start thinking all these complicated theological thoughts, which then of course I need to release and stop trying to figure out the mystery and just try to be content to be in the mystery. (Two Year Practitioner)

Decentering

Decentering is the core process that we have attributed to the long term effects of centering prayer. Inductively, between our practitioners, we found that the deepening of experience we were looking for came in the form of a divestment from their current self, the false emotional programs that Thomas Keating refers to, and a re-centering in Christ.

Our term decentering however, was inferred from an excellent study conducted by Brown & Engler, a longitudinal study that followed three different streams of eastern meditation, and used a Rorschach test to “*illustrate that the classical reports of meditation stages are more than religious belief systems: they are valid accounts of the perceptual changes that occur with intensive meditation.*” Their core process described, is a systematic deconstruction of consciousness. (Brown & Engler, 1986) Decentering, while the core process of Centering Prayer, shares similarities with other meditative practices. It could be said that Keating’s Inner Transformation, Brown and Engler’s Systematic Deconstruction, and Decentering are all parallel ideas. The immeasurable aspect though, the ineffable experience, remains in what you ‘re-center’ yourself into. In the case of Centering Prayer, Merton suggests that as the divine center. But all we can attest to measure, is the decentering of the ego. What it re-centers on, is a different question.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted in the interests of investigating the deepening of experience that practitioners of centering experience. Eleven themes were identified and organized into superior and subordinate themes, with the core process being decentering. Our thirteen questions were asked with the intention of understanding what the deepening of experience looks like, and the answers to these open ended questions were qualitatively analyzed, and inductively resulted in the creation of the eleven themes.

Thomas Keating, writes *When you practice contemplative prayer on a regular basis, your natural resources for psychic health begin to revive and you see the false value systems that are damaging your life. The emotional programs of early childhood that are buried in your unconscious begin to emerge into clear and stark awareness* (Keating 2002). What Keating refers to as the “making aware of our automatic programs”, is in keeping with what we called

Surrender on the one hand, and even more clearly evident in the subtheme “divestment of the ego”. Surrender led to further concrete effects like sleeping better and anxiety reduction. These correlated to divestment of the ego. Taken together, what we understand as the deepening of experience through practice is a radical decentering from the ego toward a higher or deeper conscious awareness. Keating called this the “inner transformation.” Brown and Engler described what we think is a comparable deepening in their study as a “systematic deconstruction” of conventional structures of consciousness and ultimately of the self (Brown & Engler, 1980)

Our 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, a divestment from the ego, a surrender into a non-ego centered basis of awareness. This description specifies in terms our study what Keating describes as “an inner transformation” and Brown and Engler describe as a “systematic deconstruction of the self”.

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APPENDIX:

ITEM NO. 1

Interview Questions for Temporal Experience of Centering Prayer Study

1. Why do you practice Centering Prayer?
 - o Looking at intentionality*
2. How long ago, and under what circumstances/how, did you first get involved in the practice of centering prayer?
 - o Question aims at origin of participants practice. This should be tied into questions around participants' Christianity: was centering prayer a supplement to "ordinary" church practices, to ground their theology, to strengthen or deepen their faith, tied to dissatisfaction with "ordinary" church, Etc.*
3. How have you kept practicing centering prayer for as long as you have?
 - o Question aims to unpack sustainability, and what keeps someone practicing in prayer*
4. Please comment on your level of commitment to centering prayer
 - o Tries to provide a safety against the problem that time doesn't equal devotion, or seriousness, and as such, can effect rate and level of change in a participant.*
5. Has your reason for practicing Centering Prayer changed over the time in which you have done it?
 - o Looking at interaction between motivation and long term practice*
6. How would you describe how centering prayer has changed for you since you started your practice?
 - o How has the actual act evolved in your practice*

7. How would you describe how your relationship to God has changed for you since you started your practice?
 - o How have your spiritual experiences changed since you began to practice?*
8. How would you describe how you have changed since you started your practice? (Be sure to try to get some “objective” markers rather than exclusively subjective self-report, like no longer need medication, reports by others of change, etc.)
 - o How have you changed since you began to practice?*
9. “Mindfulness”, yoga, and Eastern forms of meditation have become widely known and increasingly practiced over the last decade. Do you consider Centering Prayer basically the same as, or different than, other forms of contemplation or meditation, such as yoga or Buddhist meditation? Does depth or experience in practice affect this (either minimizing or eliminating differences over long practice, or maximizing and accentuating differences over long practice)?
 - o Question aims to get at possible differences due to beliefs, doctrines, religious system, theological framework, and the interaction of this with long practice*
10. A lot of research has gone into understanding the effects of contemplative or meditative practice. Based on your experience, what do you think are the most significant effects of centering prayer?
 - o Question aims to compare a subjective evaluation of quality of experience to objective studies in the research literature*
11. A common perception is that contemplative practices like centering prayer are undoubtedly good and positive. However, there is also the notion made famous by the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross that the contemplative can experience a “dark night of the soul”, which does not sound good and positive but the opposite. What is your understanding?
 - o Question aims to probe the experiential range within centering prayer practice*
12. King's is a transdenominational Christian university. Do you think Centering prayer should be practiced by students? If no, why not. If yes, why, and what do you think are the main obstacles for students?
 - o Question aims to provide King's with some insight about making contemplation a “normal option for campus life”*
13. I've asked you a lot of questions. What do you, as a long term practitioner, think is the most important question to ask? Have we missed anything important during this interview that you think should be mentioned? Do you have a final “take-home message” about your practice of Centering Prayer?
 - Question aims to provide a respectful conclusion & closure to interview*

ITEM NO. 2Interview Checklist for ResearcherUse during Experience ofCentering Prayer Study

1. Statement on intentionality
2. Statement on origin of participant practice
 - a. Supplementation to ordinary practice
3. Statement on sustainability
4. Statement on commitment
 - a. Addressing the Time/Devotion issue bias
5. Statement on interaction between motivation and long term practice
6. Statement of how the act of prayer has evolved
7. Statement on spiritual experiences
 - a. Present Day
 - b. Developmental
8. How have you changed since the start of the practice
9. Statement on possible differences due to beliefs and doctrines changing while interacting with the length of centering prayer practice
10. Statement on personal evaluation of their experience, and it's quality, compared to objective studies in research
11. Looking at the experiential range within centering prayer practice – from positives to negatives
12. Retrieve a statement about Centering prayer either being acceptable or not acceptable as a normal option for campus life for students.