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An interpretative phenomenological analysis of daily meditation and its impact on one's sense of self

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Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of daily meditation on sense of self. There is extensive research regarding the physical and mental health benefits that meditation can bring about, yet literature is still limited on the influence this has on an individual's sense of self. The aims of the current study were to contribute to the existing body of research on meditation and the self and to gain a better understanding of the link between meditation and the self. Furthermore, to look at the potential social health benefits that meditation induces. This was achieved using a qualitative methodological approach applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with an epistemological stance of interpretivism and an ontological position of social constructionism. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted in collecting qualitative data. Three super-ordinate themes emerged which were: 1. *Inside Out Positivity*, 2. *Quieting the Mind to Hear the Heart*, 3. *The Holistic Experience*, with eight corresponding sub-ordinate themes. The key findings were that meditation increased feelings of kindness and compassion and improved the quality of relationships for the participants. Participants felt more positive and calmer in their daily living and reported higher levels of awareness. Another key finding was that participants had a better perception of themselves and felt like meditation gave them more perspective of mind. Additionally, participants noted physical changes with greater bodily connection to breathing and had more mental clarity. Finally, participants reported enhanced feelings of spirituality and spoke of power and consciousness beyond themselves. The implications of these findings are that meditation can be a useful intervention for social health issues such as poor relationship quality or feelings of social exclusion by increasing compassion and awareness. Meditation is a useful tool for reducing stress and feeling present. Meditation would also be a beneficial method for positive self-perception and identity.

Keywords: Meditation; Sense of self; Social health; Mindfulness.

1. Introduction

Meditation is a human practice that has been recorded for thousands of years around the globe and across multiple different cultures. Meditation appears to be an identifiable behaviour with images of people specifically saints, sages, and mystics sitting with their legs crossed and with their eyes closed; yet is a broad term lacking a concrete and unifying definition in the psychological literature. According to Awasthi [1] neuroscientific literature uses the term 'meditation' with unclear, mixed, and confused definitions often leading to contradictions and inconsistencies in findings causing to be an important problem to be solved. This lack of understanding causes lack of replicability in research. Awasthi [1] writes that modern research uses the term 'meditation' referring to its defining feature as either relaxation, mindfulness, or attention and that most issues in studies result from studying different procedures or meditation techniques. Furthermore, failure to distinguish between the *techniques* of meditation (of which there are many) with the *state* of meditation bringing more confusion and disagreement in the field of modern research [2]. The confusion underlying the basic modern day understanding of meditation is a mix between meditation being a state of consciousness and experience, to meditate implying action, and with objects, insights, and references which serve as reflective meditations.

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1.1. Definition and History of Meditation

Those with a vague understanding of meditation might agree with Brown and Ryan's [3] definition of meditation as 'mindfulness' which is described as a state of being which attends to the awareness of what is taking place in the present moment. This could involve being mindful during the engagement of any type of behaviours such as walking, cooking, talking, brushing one's teeth, etc. It is attending to the sensations, thoughts, and feelings of what one is presently, and non-judgementally experiencing. This is often associated with Eastern meditation practices and traditions such as Buddhist, Zen, and Yoga which became more well known in the 20th century. Dispenza [4] observes that in the Tibetan language the term meditation is defined as 'to become familiar with' or 'to ponder'. This meaning allows for a more applicable account of people's experience with meditation. For to 'become familiar with' can mean any sensation, thought, feeling, movement, memory, spiritual insight, text, anything in the realm of perception and experience in a deeper, closely attentive, and reflective way. This is a wider and broader definition, yet in more specific terms some research seems confident in its operational definition such as Cardoso et al. [5] who characterize meditation as having to meet five requirements: 1. the use of a specific technique (clearly defined), 2. muscle relaxation in some moment of the process and 3. "logic relaxation"; 4. it must necessarily be a self-induced state, and 5. use of "self-focus" skill (coined "anchor"). This is the definition that the present study applied qualitatively due to its specific yet inclusive comprehension. This definition rules out sleeping or napping as in this state one does not employ requirement number 5. – the use of self-focus. But it would include practices such as Qigong, Yoga, and moving meditations as these fit all five of the criteria.

Rossano [6] argues that meditation has been a spiritual practice of the human mind that was always present in the evolution of our species and that focus, and contemplation have been mental faculties inherent to human beings. His theory proposes that 'fire-gazing' around campfires, rituals and group meditations are responsible for making us distinct as humans with the development of working memory, language, and symbolism. Peoples et al. [7] argue that meditation is as old as humanity and was most likely linked with pagan beliefs with a shaman mediator guiding others on a meditative, shamanic trance journey. Meditation is a practice and term that is mentioned in the Upanishads, the Bible, Buddhist and Taoist traditions, Islamic branches, and in more recent times has become a mindfulness programme in secular and therapeutic settings serving as a clinical intervention.

1.2. Benefits of Meditation

One of the great questions in research on meditative practice and states refers to the wide variety of reported health benefits which have been associated with meditation, whether these be physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional [8]. From research into brain-wave patterns and scans, it is understood that the brain operates at different frequencies (labelled lowest to highest) delta, theta, alpha, beta, and gamma [9]. The electro-magnetic activity in the brain changes based on the state of mind and environmental conditions. During sleep the brain is functioning at delta level brain waves (0.5-4 cycles per second) and when it is awake and distracted it is in beta level brain waves (13 cycles per second) meaning there is more stimuli to process consciously and therefore higher activity which one could call a person's default mode. However, according to Dispenza [4] one can actively lower brain wave levels during meditation from beta to alpha (8-13 cycles) and theta (4-8 cycles). He argues that this is why meditation provides such positive effects both mentally and physically as the brain can function better when brain waves are lower.

Manocha [10] suggests that meditation is one of the most effective ways to relieve stress and to improve overall mental and physical health. This research is supported by a qualitative study on eight female emergency department staff who attended a mantra-meditation program, reporting the perceived benefits of the meditation were a greater capacity to deal with stress, a higher level of attention and awareness and better emotional regulation [11]. The implications of this study are that the quality of care could be improved by better dealing with stress and that mantra-meditation could positively impact the work-environment. There is a large body of research on how mindfulness meditation reduces stress in people. For example, a meta-analysis by Chiesa and Serretti [12] found that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is effective for mental and physical disorders, as well as in healthy subjects with the effect of reducing overall stress and an enhancement of spiritual values. Vollestad et al. [13] suggest that it can help with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Though the data on this can be conflicting as other research has found that mindfulness meditation has no effect on depression and anxiety [14]. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation has been implicated to improve psychological well-being and help with the sense of 'self-nature' relationship of interconnectedness [15]. Singh and Kaur [16] suggested that the results of their findings indicated that meditation improved feelings of 'self-confidence'. This suggests that meditation can improve people's conception of themselves, cultivate confidence and strengthen connection to others.

From reviewing the available research, it is clear that engaging in a form of meditation brings about positive effects, not only to one's physical and cognitive abilities, but to a more complex psycho-spiritual mode of being, being the 'self'. The

present study explores this aspect with which meditation seems to impact. It can also be held that meditation and its impact on human experience and cognitive understanding is difficult to measure due to its complex phenomenological nature and aspects. Therefore, a qualitative enquiry is best suited for collecting data and interpreting the phenomena on an individual, subjective, and experiential level.

The concept of 'self' can relate to various other words acting as a connector and mediator for semantic meaning making. This generally intrigues one into the particularity of the self, how it emerges and develops, and the reasons why humans have one. There are multiple theories of the self, yet the main perspective of the self that guided this research study was that of Mead's [17] theory of symbolic interactionism. The philosopher Kierkegaard's [18] Christian existentialism described the self as being spirit, which is a synthesis of relations which relates to itself. The synthesis consists of the eternal with the temporal, the infinite with the finite, and the possible with the actual. Though this definition of the self is in the realms of philosophy and theology, and this research is based in social psychology, what is of use is the concept of the self being a synthesis. Similarly, this view on human nature and reality can be found in the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, with his famous proclamation: 'I am I and my circumstances,' [19]. Again, one finds the concept that the self is not one single thing, but two components. Man is both a physical and mental being. This idea is also the line of argument of Mead. The main premise behind Mead's theory is that there can be no self without structured and definite relationships with others. For to have a self an individual must belong to some sort of social group or community. It is impossible to think of an individual self separate from the group, community, and society of which they are a part of as that self is a cognitive reflection of the entire social process. The self is an example of the union of two opposing elements (self/other) necessary to create the dimension of both. Human physiology and mammalian biology is inherently social with its instincts between sexes (expressing the reproductive instinct), between parent and child (expressing the parental instinct), and between neighbours (expressing the gregarious instinct). Referring to human nature is therefore referring to something essentially social. As Watts [20] writes: there can be no *self*, without *other*. They are necessary components implying one another, as humans are inter-independent individuals who depend on each other. Baumeister [21] argues that the self is an essential combination of the body and the complex social systems of human life. Social interaction is an essential part of life, family, society, culture, and civilization which are core to the self.

1.3. The Impact of Meditation on the Self

Qualitative literature on meditation points towards significant changes in consciousness such as Lindahl and Britton's [22] research on Buddhist meditators. The results indicated six themes in participants meditation practice which showed changes in self-perception. The researchers write that this change in the sense of self can be both positive or negative and enhancing or impairing. This study highlights that Buddhist meditation acted as a powerful tool to impact self-perception in these participants, even if it was not intended or expected. What seems to be important is that the consequences of Buddhist meditation were a dissociation of one's sense of self and presence in the world, as well as knowledge suspension of self-perception that was held prior to meditation. There are many types of Buddhist meditations, yet the underlying goal is the transformation of self by training the awareness of mind and body in the present moment and to not associate with the self.

Linked to Buddhist meditation is mindfulness meditation which can induce similar effects. In another study, Kohls et al. [23] explored the impact of mindfulness meditation and fantasy relaxation on time-perception, sense of self and space orientation. No difference was found between the two interventions, although the sense of self was diminished, accompanied by feelings of self-transcendence in both. Here again one finds that the sense of self is decreased through meditation which influences self-perception. In another qualitative study, Rosaen and Benn [24] found the themes from ten middle school students who practiced transcendental meditation for a year reported higher levels of social and emotional intelligence, improved academic performance, and an increase in restful alertness. The research concluded that due to the participants meditation practices they had a better ability at understanding themselves and their social relationships. This was likely due to their capacity to introspect as well as greater focus on their schoolwork. The implication of this is that meditation practice can provide a useful way for teenagers to deal with the challenges of adolescence such as identity, understanding emotions and interpersonal skills. In addition, not only did students report benefits of meditation but 21 educators that were mainly teachers reported an overall significant impact on their lives due to their meditation practices with the most reported benefit feeling calmer and grounded [25].

Further, Mackenzie et al. [26] found in their qualitative research that the nine cancer patients who had attended an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programme improved their spiritual well-being and had a positive impact on their overall experience. The major emerging themes that were identified were: 1. opening to change, 2. self-control, 3. shared experience, 4. personal growth, 5. spirituality. This suggests that after two months of attending a weekly MBSR programme, the patients reported positive results from their engagement in the programme. The

demographic already suggests that these participants were undergoing more stress and suffering than most people because of their condition, and that meditation acted as a psychological treatment for their experience with cancer. One of the issues with this is that cancer patients are often at an existential point of their lives facing the possibility of rapid mortality, and this phenomenological experience could heighten the effects of the MBSR programme. For example, while mindfulness meditation can induce feelings of spirituality, so can the nearness of death. Despite this, the themes of the results imply that the self-perceived effects of participants' meditation practice did bring about several positive changes in their lives.

Furthermore, Sparby [27] examined the effects of anthroposophical meditation and spirituality on participants' livelihood. The concept of self, and its components of identity and community, is something that can become very primary during meditation if attended to, and participants in this study reported that their 'self' became strengthened and aligned with their ideals. Unlike Buddhist meditation where the sense of self is almost forgotten, in this meditation practice the sense of self was changed to a more positive and desired version of perception and self-experience. The discovery of a true and 'higher' self was of conscious effort and manifested because of the quiet contemplation that their meditation provided. However, the researcher wrote that the dissolving of the ego and priorly perceived identity can only be a positive element of anthroposophical meditation if a better, more ideal, and ethical version arises to replace it. If nothing arises then there is risk of depersonalisation which can become unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and unwished for.

What the qualitative literature on meditation seems to suggest is congruent, overlapping results of meditation influencing a practitioner's well-being. Changing consciousness as well as altering behaviours and attitudes towards self and others provides beneficial effects. Buddhist meditation, like mindfulness meditation, seems to promote positive emotions, moods, and mental clarity, yet little is written on the social health benefits that meditation impacts, and the effects of meditation on social life. Community and relationships are a vital aspect in constituting self-consciousness. What seems to be commonly taken back from meditation is the decreased awareness of self-consciousness and more of an experience with attention and awareness: of consciousness. One could say that during meditation one experiences the 'perceived' much more than the 'perceiver' doing the knowing, perceiving, and experiencing.

1.4. The Current Study

The literature on meditation points towards physical and mental changes as well as some qualitative research reporting changes in self-perception. However, with studies measuring physical and mental effects of meditation one does not see the wider story of how meditation has influenced people's lives, who they used to be before meditating, and why they engage in this simple activity. As a person's meditation is inseparable from their self and unique to that individual, this study became inspired by the reported health benefits the literature suggested and aspired to investigate the distinctive qualities of people's meditation practice. Therefore, the current study was interested in exploring the comprehensive experience of a person's meditation practice and the effects it has on their lives. This is personal to themselves when exploring their relationship with meditation, the development of their practice, and the changes they noticed since beginning to meditate. Therefore, the present study had several key objectives and specifically, it aimed to enrich understanding of the relation between engaging in daily meditation and the impact on the individual's sense of self. The overarching research question was: *What are the lived experiences of individuals engaging in daily meditation on their sense of self?*

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Methodological Approach

Bourne et al. [28] note that qualitative approaches in psychological research are interested in the perceptions, experiences and language of individual's when acquiring data. Research questions are used rather than hypotheses which provide open data subject to the researcher's reflexive analysis where no specific results or outcomes are expected. This gives qualitative research the advantage of using inductive reasoning with a bottom-up approach to collecting data. The aim of this is to provide greater understanding of context by giving participants more freedom and flexibility in providing data relevant to what is being studied. Meaning and quality of answers are central to qualitative research and understanding how participants make sense of their internal and external world is key. To meet the aims, this study employed a qualitative design of bottom-up, inductive reasoning. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilised for its focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences [29]. IPA is rooted in phenomenology which is directed at making sense of individual human experience. This is because human life, psychology, and sense-making is subject to vast numbers of complex socio-cultural, biological, cognitive, and experiential differences. Individuals are unique and are given a set of distinct combinations of circumstances and

perspectives, meaning that everyone has the human condition to express differently. This implies there are endless interpretations and perceptions of subjective experiences on a topic, which qualitative researchers can learn from and analyse. IPA stems from the philosophical branches of hermeneutics (understanding the interpretations of the world, others, and events), phenomenology (exploration of the lived experiences of individuals), and idiographic analysis which is the focus on in-depth particulars such as people, context, objects, and topics. IPA is best suited to answer the research question given above as it is addressed at people's lived experiences of their self-perception and the meaning of meditation in their specific context. Meditation and the sense of self are both concepts and phenomena which are known through direct, personal, and subjective experience; therefore, it is fitting to investigate these experiences using an approach that specialises in interpretation of idiomatic cognitive and behavioural undertakings.

2.2. Epistemological Positionality and Philosophical Underpinnings

Psychology has its roots in philosophy which provides perspective to theories, phenomena, and research being studied. Epistemology is one of the branches of philosophy concerned with the theory and nature of knowledge and how it can be studied. The epistemological position taken for this study will be in line with the pragmatics of qualitative research which is interpretivism. This view suggests that knowledge and meaning is only attainable through the context in which individuals perceive, experience, and make sense of it. Interpretivism allows for a wider scope of understanding considering various factors that may influence one's cognition and behaviour. Ontology is the philosophy of being, reality, and existence. The ontological stance that this study applies is social constructionism. This proposes that reality is created by the micro and macro happenings of the social world contributed to it by its social actors' perceptions and actions which take a continuous and developing course. Language and symbols are at the heart of the creation and comprehension of social reality, serving as representations of that experience where meaning is dependent on the social world and on social interactions. For this research to gain insight into the reality of participants' experiences of meditation and sense of self is through the language used and shared understanding of symbols. This view is complimented using Mead's symbolic interactionism as the theory of the self, which serves as the reflection of society providing the understanding of social reality, which is only possible through symbolic interaction.

2.3. Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

This study recruited six participants from a diverse sample in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and occupation with all participants having meditation practice as the common factor. Smith et al. [30] write that in IPA research, quality is more important than quantity when it comes to the sample size noting that several recruited participants is sufficient to meet the aims of IPA's phenomenological and idiographic aspects. The recruitment method used was convenience and snowball sampling via word of mouth and social media applications including Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and Facebook where recruitment flyers for the study were sent to group chats and individuals. Participant names remained anonymous throughout the study and pseudonyms were assigned. Participants ages ranged between 25 and 59 years. The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants had to be over 18 years; they had to engage in daily or almost daily meditation within six months of the study.

2.4. Materials and Procedures

Participants were initially invited to report specific demographic information regarding their age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. A semi-structured interview schedule followed, and this involved five questions alongside additional prompts. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed participants to further elaborate on their answers and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Following written consent, a mutually available time was agreed, and semi-structured interviews were recorded to facilitate the transcription process. Interviews lasted between 50-60 minutes. Participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

After transcription of the interviews, data were analysed using IPA. The first step consists of reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with the participant's experience. The second step consists of initial noting and coding of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. The third step consists of identifying the emerging themes in the data. The fourth step consists of searching for connections across these emerging themes and making links. The fifth step consists of moving to the next data set and repeating the first four steps. The final step consists of finding patterns across all the cases and establishing the final themes.

3. Results and Discussion

After applying the IPA analysis process, three super-ordinate themes emerged with eight sub-ordinate themes corresponding to the main connections. Each super-ordinate theme had a certain number of sub-ordinate themes within them. Table 1 presents all emergent themes, which are discussed throughout the findings section. The super-ordinate

themes that emerged using qualitative analysis were: Inside Out Positivity, “Quieting the Mind to Hear the Heart”, and the Holistic Experience. The words that are used to describe participants’ experience are valuable to unlocking a glimpse of their world and experiences.

Table 1 Themes and Sub-themes

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-ordinate theme
Inside Out Positivity	More Compassion, Less Resentment Abundance of Inner Joy You and I in The Here and Now
“Quieting the Mind to Hear the Heart”	The Mind-Space Soul-Searching Journey
The Holistic Experience	Breathing Deeper to Benefit the Body Mental Prosperity Raising the Spirit

3.1. Super-ordinate Theme: Inside Out Positivity

3.1.1. Sub-ordinate Theme 1: More Compassion, Less Resentment

Participants reported that they had felt kinder and more compassionate towards their relations and the interactions they were engaged in. All participants noted that their social relationships had improved, and generally felt more positive in their interactions with others noting more kindness, compassion, and understanding. Some participants shared that before incorporating meditation into their lives they described themselves as reactive, sometimes resentful, and judgmental which shifted when meditation became an activity of daily engagement.

Participants narratives also indicate the powerful effect that meditation had on the perception of others and their attitude and behavior to interactions. This could be because of personal, internal resolutions that were facilitated by meditation to boost self-esteem which was then externalised onto others [31]. That is, because meditation led to more self-confidence, acceptance, and emotional regulation it became easier to apply this positivity with other people.

Linking with compassion, part of what made participants report better social connections with others was that they had an enhanced ability to understand the situations of those with whom they interacted with, especially those they disagreed with. This points towards the participants’ ability to separate people’s unintentional actions (or reactions) with their essence. One of the reasons for this phenomenon could be that meditation gives the participant time to strengthen their ability to let go of things that they are unable to control, such as the actions and opinions of others [32].

3.1.2. Sub-ordinate Theme: Abundance of Inner Joy

Another sub-ordinate theme that was present here was the internal enjoyment, peace, calm, and gratitude which participants sensed they achieved from their meditation practice. Meditation was phenomena which the participants took pleasure in and connected them with feelings of positivity. Participants shared that they generally felt calmer and more grateful in their daily lives, and overall, were happier.

Furthermore, participants expressed how they had more capacity to appreciate things in their lives including others. Some participants spoke more on gratitude of things in nature, the things that they have and can do, while others spoke more on being grateful for others. Gratitude begins with being truly aware of the presence of a particular thing so that one can appreciate it as an end.

Narratives further showed that through meditation, participants were able to observe the correspondence of things, specifically the big and the small, which made it easier to appreciate little things. This thankfulness of little things was prevalent in the proliferation of small acts of kindness, as well as deeds in the workplace.

As evidenced in the literature, meditation leads participants to feel calmer and more peaceful, they have more cognitive capacity to attend to things with an attitude of gratitude [33]. This makes sense considering the research on meditation

points towards higher levels of gratitude. Meditation allows one to feel calm, and being calm leads to opportunity for gratitude, which further leads to happiness and positive emotions.

3.1.3. Sub-ordinate Theme: You and I in the Here and Now

A commonly touched upon theme was feelings of being more present in day-to-day activities and interactions with others. Attending to the present moment is something commonly associated with meditation and is a skill of mindfulness that meditation enhances. Participants voiced how they can be mindful in their interactions with others and can observe social engagements in a non-reactive manner.

The narratives indicated that people become very present during their meditation practice and that this type of awareness carries on into daily life, for example when preparing food, tasting food, listening in conversation, and with performing sport. This could be because individuals connect with their breath and body during meditation leading them to feel more present, which then becomes more accessible and transferable to everyday scenarios. This is plausible considering that existing research suggests that meditation increases the mindfulness of the flow of present experience without becoming attached or placing judgements upon actions [34]. Being aware of the present moment in a mindful way is a skill which the participants are practicing through meditation.

3.2. Super-ordinate Theme: “Quieting the Mind to Hear the Heart”

3.2.1. Sub-ordinate Theme: The Mind-Space

Participants voiced an altered experience of feeling a greater space with which meditation provided. For them, the experience of this new, internal space allowed them to see things more rationally, from different perspectives, and make decisions more objectively. Furthermore, participants shared that they had a larger perspective on life, on others, and on their behaviors and values which provided them with greater meaning. Participants appeared to have discovered a deeper, intellectual understanding of the ontological aspects of their experiences of reality, being the passing of thoughts and feelings, and the impermanence of the material world.

What was particularly intriguing, was that participants’ phenomenological understanding of impermanence was only made experientially clear to them after meditating. For example, participants’ experiences reflected understanding that meditation sharpens the intuition of acknowledging and observing one’s passing thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise in a practice session. This is an internal recognition of the stream and flow of sensory, intellectual, and emotional faculties which are then recognized in larger concepts and observances of life using the other senses. As some research suggests, meditators broaden the boundaries of sense-perception [35].

3.2.2. Sub-ordinate Theme: Soul-Searching Journey

A pattern found among meditation experiences was the participants’ evolving journeys with meditation and in becoming more familiar with who they were. Participants seemed to have a better overview on their emotions, beliefs, and thoughts, and could self-identify in more positive ways.

Participants shared experiences of the benefits of meditation which is a realization of self [36]. This may be because through their meditation practice, they had more time to introspect by themselves without being distracted by others’ perceptions. Therefore, they could identify with their inner self. Overall, meditation helped them have a better perspective of themselves and the space that meditation provided expanded their self-identification. Participants also shared feelings of how their self-esteem had improved by viewing themselves as more than they thought they were prior to meditation. They could be experiencing the positive effects of meditational states on altering consciousness and identity as some research suggests [37]. Their meditation could be allowing for more profound reflections to arise. This is something which participants shared about their practice, saying that the increase in space created more positive self-perceptions.

Another finding that links to identity was the sense of detachment from the ego that participants had experienced. This detachment was not always a good feeling but could also feel alienating. These contraries, the natural rhythm of the self and the reactive processes of society, seemed to lead to a detachment from the world. This could be both positive and negative depending on the situation. ‘Who am I?’ is one of the most existential questions one can ask oneself and meditation seems to be one of the best ways to exploring the answer. Participants appeared to have listened to their own self-perception rather than being defined by how they thought others perceived them.

3.3. Super-ordinate Theme: The Holistic Experience

3.3.1. Sub-ordinate Theme: Breathing Deeper to Benefit the Body

A fundamental part of the experience of meditation is the focus on the breath. The breath is a voluntary and involuntary activity happening automatically and manually and often serves as the anchor-point in the meditator's attention. Furthermore, the breath seems to be the entrance into opening the meditative state. The breath also acts as a tool to connect the mind with the body, as it is something that happens automatically making participants feel more connected to themselves and their natural breath cycle. All participants reported focusing on their breath during meditation, which served as an anchor-point. Furthermore, most participants shared that meditation had positively impacted their physical health. Meditation seemed to benefit their functioning and acted as a self-care method which helped them as social individuals in their daily lives. They said that they felt much lighter since meditating and after a practice. This suggests that experiencing blockages and tension in the body is something that feels heavy in the body and on the mind, something that meditation can alleviate. Bobby could be experiencing one of the reported effects of meditation being a sense of physical healing [38]. Connecting to their breath may be relaxing their entire body and creating a calming physical state. It also implies a profound effect that the breath has on one's state of mind during meditation and how closely linked the breath is to meditation. Individuals' connection to the breath allows them to shut out perceived stressors (such as expectations) and keep their awareness on the breathing body. This awareness and 'losing themselves' in the breath comes naturally and requires little effort, where they move from a state of 'doing' and 'having' to a natural state of 'being'. Kabatt-Zinn [39] suggests that meditation is a way of being, and not a technique. It leads individuals to be relaxed and feel safe in their body as not much conscious attention is needed to react to sensory stimuli, but rather just to be focused on the breath.

Finally, participants shared that people in the modern world had become used to a new type of consciousness which was fast-paced, reactive, and sometimes artificial. Meditation seemed to be a treatment to the effects of modern society and a way of becoming more in touch with oneself. This could be due to embracing a mindfulness attitude of 'letting go' which has been widely reported to benefit physical functioning, relax the body, and connect the body with the mind in the present moment [40, 41, 42]. This allows them to become connected with their body in the here and now, slowing down bodily processes which benefits them both physically and mentally. In this context, the breath appears to be an essential part of meditation and a necessary component of 'getting into' the meditation experience. This could be explained as the breath revealing the association with one's default ground of being – being a breathing organism, and therefore identifying less with the constructed social self that society reflects.

3.3.2. Sub-ordinate Theme 2: Mental Prosperity

A feature that was commonly alluded to by the participants in this study was that meditation gave them a sense of greater mental clarity. This clarity was often experienced during the meditation and continued into their daily lives. Their lived experiences highlight that meditation slows down the automatic, reactive processing that individuals usually reasons from, which leads to distractions, stress, and fear from external stimuli. Once they have meditated to become calmer, participants reported to start to see things more clearly, for longer, and with greater receptivity rather than aversion [43]. When they are less reactive, they have more time to think and choose how they wish to respond accordingly.

Meditation was important for participants in this study because they felt without it, they could have lost their sanity due to the stressful circumstances in which they were living. This indicates the degree to which meditation can assist as a coping strategy for stress. The reason meditation was central to individuals' in their daily lives could be aligned to the research on how meditation is being used as a tool for mental health and stress support [44]. Considering the circumstances that some participants were in at the time, it is logical that meditation is something vital to maintain effective functioning and optimism. This point further resonates with the fact that meditation informed parenting as a self-care method for participants to remain emotionally stable.

3.3.3. Sub-ordinate Theme 3: Raising the Spirit

Meditation has historically been linked with religious traditions and spiritual growth. A common theme that was observed here was that participants were either interested in spirituality before meditating (and considered themselves spiritual) or had become interested in spirituality since meditating. Participants mentioned that meditation was a spiritual activity, and it was a way of attaining higher consciousness. Others spoke about God. Some described their practice as becoming closer with themselves. And others said that they had become more aware of a universal love, consciousness, and/or positive energy which was discovered through their evolving practice. Meditation proved useful as a tool for growth in all areas of life. This aided work-life balance and skills development.

Data from this study also suggested that experiences and interpretations of spiritual concepts such as awareness, liberation, enlightenment, higher consciousness, unity, and detachment were heightened through meditation. This awareness of transient powers and energy beyond the natural and material was something shared among all participants. Finally, participants reported experiencing heightened feelings of spiritual well-being through meditation because people can feel connected to a transcendent power and experience an interconnected unity of all living things [45]. This connection can ultimately increase knowledge at an intuitive level, as well as fill one with a sense of peace and tranquility with connections beyond the usual spatial boundaries.

4. Discussion

Meditation practice appeared to have a positive impact on sense of self in this study. However, a wide body of the existing literature on meditation proposes it is in the forgetting of self during a session that proves to be beneficial [46, 47, 48]. Participants in the present study experienced a self-forgetfulness when they meditate, which in turn positively influenced their sense of self and identity. Epstein [49] wrote that experienced Buddhist meditators often report the dissolution and suspension of self, known as ‘anatman’, during a meditative experience. The results of this study emphasize this through the participants reports on how they experienced self-forgetfulness *when* meditating, yet *since* meditating they generally had a better perception of themselves. This can be translated to mean that during meditation and following a session there is more consciousness as there is experience of vitality and self-forgetfulness. According to Sainsbury [50] consciousness is operating from a quickening of life and experiencing a heightening of vitality. Upon interpretation, it is ‘losing itself’ in the act, which is found in the participants’ experience of meditation. On the other hand, self-consciousness is associated with less activity and vitality and more reflection. According to Mead’s [17] theory of symbolic interactionism, the ‘I’, being the self’s immediate experience involved in action and reaction. Self-consciousness would be the ‘Me’, which is only when the participant begins to reflect on self, and the attitude of others. A way of interpreting the benefits of the participants’ meditation is the dissociation of self during their practice. This eventually would have a positive sense of self-perception when they would reflect on their ‘self’. Though this is phenomena which is reported, more qualitative research would be useful to explore the ‘consciousness’ and ‘self-consciousness’ links with meditation.

The participants’ practice fits the five criteria of Cardoso et al. [5] operational definition of meditation as outlined in the introduction. This involved a technique, the breath as the focused anchor point, a self-induced state, muscle relaxation and logic suspension. Jerath et al. [51] illustrated that meditation shifts the autonomic nervous system from a sympathetic to a predominantly parasympathetic state of awareness. This results in physical changes and impacts consciousness to reduce stress and increase a mind-body connection. Participants shared that they felt calmer, more relaxed, and less stressed about things they thought were unnecessary. These results meant that their decrease in stress due to daily meditation was an important feature of what attracted them to their practice.

The implications of these findings are that experiencing meditation, by focusing on the breath and connecting with the body could be a beneficial intervention to promote social health and relationship quality. This could be a recommended practice for those experiencing feelings of isolation, alienation, and social exclusion. The significance of compassion and understanding in close relationships is clear, which are feelings that frequent meditation can enhance. Furthermore, the results suggest that meditative practice helps to reduce perceived stress and anxiety and promote self-esteem regarding topics such as identity. This is an important aspect to note for stress-coping and the overall satisfaction and psychological wellbeing reported to have elevated daily life and social engagements. Finally, daily meditation was a factor in positive self-perception suggesting it to be a useful method for overcoming negative mindsets and attitudes. Overall, daily meditation appeared to be a positive habit for participants in this study, and for some, profound and lifechanging.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed eight sub-ordinate themes that were categorised into 3 super-ordinate themes regarding daily meditation and its impact on the sense of self. Meditation was regarded a positive activity that influenced self-perception and social health. The implications of this are that meditation may serve as a powerful intervention to support social health issues such as identity, exclusion, and alienation by increasing feelings of compassion and understanding for others. There are indications that relationship quality could improve a result of daily meditation. Future recommendations for studies would be to conduct longitudinal phenomenological research on the effects of long-term meditation on the sense of self and on social connections. A cross-cultural study would be useful to observe the environmental and cultural effects on an individual’s practice. And a mixed-methods study could provide data on internal, individual experiences of meditation, as well as the external, collective impact it might have. There is much

more on meditation, the self, and social health that could be explored, which calls for more research in this field of enquiry.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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