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**Social Noting Meditation:
Social Connection and Intersubjective Awareness
Through Online Interpersonal Practice**

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Mindfulness Studies, Lesley University

September 2023

Dr. Melissa Jean & Dr. Andrew Olendzki

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Abstract

While an abundance of research exists on various aspects of meditation, relatively few studies explore interpersonal practice. Those that do often explore the outcome of mindfulness where an individual practitioner applies mindfulness in a relational context. However, there is a lack of research into interpersonal practice involving intersubjective awareness with two or more practitioners engaging in synchronous interpersonal practice. In addition, while research into the consistently growing field of online meditation practice is expanding, studies examining interpersonal meditation practices taking place online are few and far between. In response to this situation, the following thesis explores existing studies on interpersonal practice incorporating digital applications, while looking closely at online Social Noting Meditation as a means of cultivating intersubjective awareness and the sensed experience of social connection.

Keywords: group meditation practice, interbeing, interdependent co-arising, interpersonal meditation, intersubjectivity, Mahasi noting, online meditation, social connection, Social Meditation, Social Noting Meditation

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Social Noting Meditation:

Social Connection and Intersubjective Awareness Through Online Interpersonal Practice

Over 2,000 years ago, the Buddha awoke to profound comprehension of both multiplicity and simplicity in simultaneous co-existence. Likewise, he recognized the relationship between awareness, perspective, and experience amidst the interdependent co-arising of phenomena. His teachings have traveled far and wide taking roots across the globe while evolving through iterations still arising. One such iteration has been that of turning toward interpersonal practice. While social engagement has long been a central aspect in the Buddha's teachings, through compassionate action in the form of service as well as in community meditations, until recently these communal sats have been primarily silent, with the exception of practices such as chanting in unison, group recitation of discourses, or guided meditation. With modernity, globalization, and unprecedented advances in communications, the 20th century has brought with it a new approach to meditative engagement commonly referred to as interpersonal meditation. A diversity of practices have surfaced reflecting roots in ancient wisdom while exploring potential amidst a modern and the still emerging metamodern context of interdependent complexity. One such practice, Social Noting Meditation, was developed by meditation teacher Kenneth Folk, who through a pedagogical exploration incorporating Mahasi Sayadaw's well-established noting method, discovered a whole new way to come together in practice.

Since discovering Social Noting Meditation while attending an online retreat during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, I have been compelled by the potential it gives way to, sensed not only by myself but noted as well by a number of fellow Social Noting Practitioners. Having stayed consistent with Social Meditation practice attending trainings and facilitating sessions for the past three years, my interest and belief in the potential in Social Noting Practices has only

grown in depth and breadth. While this clearly points to my positionality, in writing this thesis I aim to identify existing research that supports rationale for future research into Social Noting Meditation while identifying specific areas of potential as well as possible limitations to bear in mind when designing and implementing such research. In what follows, I examine existing studies regarding: social connectedness and intersubjectivity through interpersonal practice, interpersonal practice through digital and online mediums, and a means of measuring trait mindfulness in interpersonal practice context. Relative to this research, I offer an overview of Social Noting Meditation, which I suggest is a means to strengthen sensed experience of social connectedness while cultivating intersubjective awareness through online interpersonal practice.

Turning Attention Inward, Outward, and Between

Though the earliest records of meditation practice trace back to eastern regions of the globe from approximately 1500 years BCE, meditation did not become popular in the western hemisphere until the mid-20th century (Mind Works, 2023). With regard to meditation as a means of understanding experience, as Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendzki (2010) offers in *Unlimiting Mind*, “while the Western sciences developed from the interaction of Indo-European and Mediterranean thought, both of which are fundamentally outward facing, meditation has its roots in the inward-looking perspectives of ancient Indus valley culture” (Olendzki, 2010, p. 2). That being so, relative to modernity and globalization ancient meditation practices from the East have gained widespread attention. Not only is meditation no longer a foreign practice in the West, now more than ever there is a more inclusive, integral perspective broadening interest in the potential of turning inward as well as outward, and what’s more, in between through the mutual exploration of co-emergent phenomena in relational context.

Where meditation was once an intrapersonal practice, mainly done alone or sitting with but not interacting with others and silently turning inward, more interpersonal practices have begun to develop exploring both inward and outward contemplation, bringing mindful awareness of self, other, and relationship to collective experience. Some more commonly known examples of such practices include: David Bohm’s Bohm Dialogue (n.d.); Gregory Kramer’s (2007) Insight Dialogue; Dennis Genpo Merzel’s Big Mind Big Heart (Merzel, 2007); Guy Sengstock’s Circling (Circling Institute, n.d.); Ria Baeck’s Collective Presencing (n.d.); and Kenneth Folk’s Social Meditation, further developed by Vince and Emily Horn.

In all cases, interpersonal group practices such as these are emerging and continuously evolving with numerous benefits. As co-founder of Buddhist Geeks, Vince Fakhoury Horn (2021) offers “Social (Noting) Meditation, for me, has become an open-ended and evolving approach to being with experience and each other and it’s very much co-evolving.” Amidst this co-evolution, meditation has widened into practice that reaches beyond interoception and exteroception, further expanding into the exploration of intersubjectivity.

Interdependence and Intersubjectivity

Humans are inherently social beings. The relational aspect of our nature shows up internally through the relationship among the various systems within the body, as well as externally, in the various social systems we simultaneously co-exist amidst throughout our lives: e.g., families, communities, religions, cultures, nations, and industries. As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (2017) offered, “we do not exist independently. We inter-are. Everything relies on everything else in the cosmos in order to manifest—whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, or you and me” (paras. 4-5). Another way of expressing this insight is through the South African term, *ubuntu*, commonly translated as: Í am

because you are. Or, as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu offers, ubuntu is “the essence of being human.” In reflection, former US president Barak Obama (2013) relayed, “we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; there is a oneness to humanity; we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others and caring for those around us” (para.10). This view of self-achievement through the relational experience of sharing and caring is somewhat different than the 21st century lens of individualism and egoism often observed in modern societies (Minogue, 2012). As Archbishop Tutu further offered, “we think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world” (as cited in Attard, 2022). These understandings are more than philosophical in nature. The innately relational aspect of human being has been clearly identified in scientific studies examining neurobiological evidence of interbeing, also referred to as interdependence. In recognition of research on the relational aspect of developmental process and human behavior, biological anthropologist Michael Platt, Ph.D., offers that “human beings are wired to connect; we have the most complex and interesting social behavior of all animals, a critical part of our adaptive toolkit” (Sukel, 2019).

The complexity Platt speaks of has become ever more apparent in the internet era, wherein human socialization has brought an arrival of unprecedented ingenuity and creativity. Coincidentally, the adaptive element of social connection is notably significant considering the rapid change that occurs through such evolutionary advances. Yet, while social connection has expanded in reach and accessibility through widespread application of social media, studies demonstrate heightened reports of loneliness on a global scale, often linked to increased rates of the individualism noted by Archbishop Tutu. (Schermer et al., 2023; *Self-reported Loneliness Among Older Adults*, n.d.). Though social connection is occurring through both in-person and

online engagement, research also shows that a sense of true connection is lacking (Sukel, 2019). As Pickering (2019) suggests, “the idea of human autonomy and individualism, stemming from over-emphasis on ‘I am’ and ‘I think’, leads to the primacy of the intra-psychic and hence to a position of solipsistic isolation” (p. 753). However, as Platt offers “if we can understand a little bit more about how we do connect with one another, and how that affects us – and maybe even ways to facilitate those kind of connections – there could be immense translational benefits” (Sukel, 2019).

In response to this awareness, in May 2023 the US surgeon General presented a framework for a “National Strategy to Advance Social Connection: a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation” (Dillinger, 2023; *Social Connection — Current Priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General*, n.d.). With resonant intentions, researchers have looked to mindfulness and meditation as a means to strengthen social connection. Many studies have investigated the potential for meditation practice to support cultivation of greater prosocial qualities such as compassion, kindness, and empathy (Dahl & Davidson, 2019; Pratscher et al., 2018).

Outcomes of such research has supported turning attention toward interpersonal mindfulness. That said, many of the existing studies on interpersonal meditation focus on trait mindfulness outcomes of an individual’s application of mindfulness in interpersonal contexts. While this is valuable, there is a lack of research into interpersonal practice where two or more practitioners consciously interact amidst meditative engagement. These practices are particularly significant in terms of training in intersubjective awareness, which Cooper-White (2014) defines as “the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, between two persons or more ‘subjects,’ as facilitated by empathy” (p. 882).

The lack of research into intersubjective practice may be due to the fact that until recently, meditation has most commonly been practiced intrapersonally in the privacy of an individual's subjective and objective experience. However, as pragmatic dharma meditation teacher and creator of Social Noting Meditation Kenneth Folk offers: "meditation is the bringing of attention to experience, and training in meditation is training in attention. By this definition, neither isolation nor silence are required; we can train together, and that is good, because together is what we were born for" (Folk, 2017-b). This view is shared and showing up more and more as we collectively awaken to our interdependent nature and its complex implications, including our basic need for social connection. With interest in meditation as a means of cultivating social connection, a 2016 study compared outcomes of individual mindfulness practice with interpersonal dyads involving intersubjectivity.

Contemplative Practice Dyads as a Means to Social Connection and Mindful Engagement

In response to a noted increase in stress related illnesses, depression, and subjective loneliness, alongside a clear lack of interventions to increase perceived social connectedness, Kok and Singer (2016) designed and implemented a randomized longitudinal clinical study on the effects of contemplative dyads on engagement and perceived social connectedness. Similar in structure and practice to the contemplative dyads practiced in Gregory Kramer's (2007) Insight Dialogue meditation, Kok and Singer (2016) offer that the dyads are a meditation practice where "the speaker voices whatever comes to mind regarding a topic as the listener's presence promotes focus for the other's contemplation" (p. E2).

The study consisted of 242 participants with no previous meditation experience divided into three training cohorts (TC1, TC2, TC3). The research procedure involved three consecutively offered mind-training modules: 1) The presence module: with secularized breath

and body scan meditation implementation intended to support stability of mindful attention, as well as “interoceptive awareness” (p. E3). 2) The affect module: training “socioaffective capacities via the affect dyad and lovingkindness meditation” (p. E2) intended to address the caring and emotional system, while exercising capacity to be with difficult emotions and also develop care, compassion, gratitude, and other emotions experienced as positive/pleasant and also considered pro-social. 3) The perspective module: a meta-cognitive module involving perspective taking on self and other through observing-thoughts meditation and perspective dyad practice.

While TC3 completed only the affect Model, TC1 and TC2 both participated in the presence module at home, by listening to a recorded guided meditation five times a week after and prior to completing questions about their subjective state. Participants in all three cohorts participated in the affect and perspective contemplative dyads, where they met daily for ten-minutes of practice “with a randomly assigned partner using a custom designed website or smartphone app” (p. E4).

Results indicated that “across all three cohorts, motivation was higher for the meditations relative to the dyads” (p. E5). What is more, “both dyads significantly increased felt closeness from before to after practice for all training cohorts” (p. E6). Also worth noting is the recognition that “the rate of growth in pre-practice closeness was significant for all modules in all cohorts” (p. E6), indicating that regular dyad practice increased perceived social connection over time, even prior to actual moments of engagement. These findings contributed to Kok and Singer’s (2016) conclusion that “contemplative dyads represent a new type of intervention targeting social connectedness and intersubjective capacities” (p. E1). Considering these indications for the potential to cultivate such qualities through interpersonal practice, it is coincidentally significant to

note the study's demonstration that through implementation of phone and digital applications, "regular dyadic contemplative practice at home can be used to foster perceived social connectedness" (p. E7). This supports indications that routine implementation of even 10-minutes of practice in dyads may offer a means of support amidst experiences of chronic loneliness. That said, there are limitations within the study that call for attention when reviewing these conclusions.

Considering the mean age of 41.15 years among participants, further research into more diverse age groups would support validity in applying these findings to both younger and elderly populations. Moreover, while this study reflects a significant pool of research conducted with participants in Leipzig and Berlin, Germany, further reaching demographics could better support conclusions relative to a broader range of contexts while also addressing gaps in the research calling for future studies. This would also support the potential for offering the noted benefits of contemplative practice dyads in intercultural contexts given the possibility for practice dyads to take place regardless of geographical distance between practice partners when employing the mobile applications referenced within this study. That noted, before further acknowledging the themes of social connectedness, intersubjectivity, and enhanced motivation as relative to Social Noting Meditation, given the synchronous online component of the practice, let us first bring closer attention to the recognized potential for these states to arise amidst interpersonal practice taking place through digital applications as seen in Kok and Singer's (2016) research.

State Mindfulness and Social Connection through Group Video Simulation

In a 2021 pilot study on the effects of video-guided group versus solitary meditation on mindfulness and social connectivity, Hanley et al. (2021) brought attention to the potential

impact of environmental setting on mindfulness practice. Their research examined outcomes of video-guided meditation in three practice settings:

(1) the *group practice setting*, in which they watched a video of a group meditation session while listening to the guided meditation, (2) the *nature practice setting*, in which they watched a nature scene while listening to the guided meditation, or (3) the *solitary practice setting*, in which they watched a blank screen while listening to the guided meditation. (p. 318)

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three guided video settings where they were “seated directly in front of a computer monitor, provided noise canceling headphones, and instructed to let their eyes rest gently on the computer monitor. A pre-recorded body scan meditation, adapted from Kabat-Zinn (1990), was used to promote the state of mindfulness” (Hanley et al., 2021, p. 318). Upon completion of the 8-minute-long video-guided practice, participants completed measures of state mindfulness and social connection in the following areas: Dispositional Mindfulness with the The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), State Mindfulness with The Toronto Mindfulness Scale, Social Connectedness measured with The Social Connectedness Scale (SCS), and State Affect measured with The Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Hanley et al., 2021, p. 319).

In addition to the above noted measures, Hanley et al. (2021) implemented Statistical Analysis using Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) “to establish between group equivalency at *pre-testing* in dispositional mindfulness and state affect as well as to determine between group differences at *post-testing* in state mindfulness and social connectedness” (p. 319). Data gathered from these measures demonstrated considerable differences among the groups. While “the video-guided group meditation and solitary, blank screen conditions were

the most effective for inducing the state of mindfulness (p. 320), the video-guided group meditation resulted in significantly greater reports of social connectedness (p. 320).” These findings offer preliminary indications of the influence of practice setting on state mindfulness outcome. Moreover, they point to the potential support of group practices for beginner meditators through the enhanced effects of social connectedness through group practice. The study also sheds light on how these benefits are possible even through video simulation of group practice. That said, there is no empirical indication through this research as to whether the noted increase in social connectedness through group contextualization influences continued meditation practice. Further research on this would be beneficial in addition to research on the effects of these simulated practices on more seasoned practitioners. Furthermore, in order to increase the study’s validity, verification of group equivalency by measuring state mindfulness and social connectivity at baseline would support the noted findings relative to outcome measures of these factors.

While the results of this study provide support for continued research, there are other limitations calling for attention, such as the limited sample size and lack of diversity among the study participants. Increasing the reach of these variables would provide greater understanding of the potential benefits of online offerings and group practice. Likewise, as Hanley et al. acknowledge “using a mixed methods approach in a future study would allow for a more complete understanding of participant experiences” (Hanley et al., 2021, p. 321). Other limitations are relative to the fact that the study conclusions regarding the impact of setting on practice outcome based entirely on video simulation. As Hanley et al. (2021) confirm:

Future studies with greater ecological validity that examine the effects of meditating in group and nature settings in vivo are needed to verify these initial findings. Future studies

may also wish to compare in-person group practice to interactive video-guided group practice (e.g., Zoom Meeting, Google Hangout) or even virtual reality group practice. (p. 321)

This call to further research is worth noting, particularly given the recognition that state mindfulness and social connectedness proved highest in the group setting. In addition, whereas the group video element of the Hanley et al. study was prerecorded, research exploring synchronous interactive group-video practice would provide greater indication of the validity of these outcomes. Moreover, such research could prove highly beneficial given that online practice opportunities extend the reach of accessibility by eliminating implications of on-site practices, such as travel cost, time, and mobility requirements, not to mention the increasing need for alternatives to in-person practice amidst possible social distancing demands as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. That noted, consideration for existing research on in-person versus digital practice is also worth examining when considering the potential value of synchronous online practices such as Social Noting Meditation.

In Person Group Practice Versus Solitary Digital Practice

In a 2013 study Lauricella examined the outcome of a group of 40 undergraduate students learning mindfulness meditation through the application of a 15-minute guided body scan meditation offered by their instructor in two contexts: 1) face-to-face, in person 2) listening to a digital podcast version of the session. One week following the in-person session, the students were asked to listen to the digital session at least once in their own time. In both cases, immediately following the practice, the students completed an anonymous self-report survey.

Results demonstrated that “(58 %, n = 23) preferred the face-to-face version of the exercise, (26 %, n = 11) preferred the mp3 version, 5 % (n=2) liked doing it on their own without

an mp3, and 10 % (n = 4) reported that the format did not matter” (Lauricella, 2013, p. 684). The most commonly reported reason for preferring the face-to-face session was related to the noted benefit of the physical presence of the instructor, for example regarding the sense of safety and protection that reportedly offered (p. 685). Participants also noted that they “enjoyed the sense of community evident in a group practice” (p. 685). Some participants observed feeling “one with my classmates,” and “feeling the collective energy” (p. 685). In reflection on these reports, it is significant to note the sense of cohesion and unity that supports preference for synchronous group practice. Moreover, the sense of safety and community observed when practicing with others points to potential motivation for continued practice through synchronous shared practice.

In addition to the sense of community observed in group practice, “10 % of all participants noted the accountability inherent in practicing with an instructor and colleagues in a face-to-face format” (Lauricella, 2013, p. 685). Here, the factor of accountability experienced in synchronous group practice not only supports a pleasant sense of togetherness in shared space, it also suggests implications of effectiveness of the practice. In fact, while some students noted preference for the digital format for reasons relative to self-consciousness, such as fear of falling asleep or the confidentiality of practicing alone, “20 % of participants in this study mitigated their praise for the digital format by adding that despite the calming effects of the digital practice and the benefit of its inherent privacy, it was “not as effective as face-to-face” (p. 686).

Considering the noted benefits of synchronous group practice brings attention to the potential value in continuing this research with greater diversity and sample size; particularly given that Lauricella’s study sample was limited in race, religion, gender, and age, with the majority of participants self-reported as Caucasian Christian females between the ages of 19-23

(Lauricella, 2013, p. 684). While a larger sample with a broader reach in diversity would offer more validity as to the overall conclusions of the study, it may be significant to note that though there were twice as many females than male participants, “among females, 56 % preferred the face-to-face delivery (and) among males, 54 % preferred the face-to-face delivery” (p. 686). This indicates the possibility that sex may not have been a determinant factor in terms of context preference in this study. That notwithstanding, further research is needed in order to come to more viable conclusions. Another point for consideration is the fact that “most participants (73 %, n = 29) had no prior experience with a meditative exercise like the body scan completed in this study” (p. 684). Including another sample group composed of more seasoned practitioners, as well as a sample group of mixed experience levels among participants would support more thorough and informative conclusions in subsequent research.

Finally, although this study presents clear preference for face-to-face in-person practice versus solitary digital practice, as Lauricella (2013) offers, “it is possible that additional modes of online or digital delivery (perhaps synchronous rather than asynchronous) may be of interest to practitioners” (p. 687). Moreover, given that qualitative comments relative to the face-to-face practice in this study highlight the notion of being “one with”, “collective energy of the group” and an overall sense of community” (p. 685&687), it may be beneficial to further explore the findings of this study by examining the effects of synchronous group meditation practice online. As of date, there is no apparent research on this practice context, while it is a growing phenomenon for which routine online sessions can be found and are attended by an international range of practitioners. Kenneth Folk and Vince Fakhoury Horn’s Social Noting Meditation practices are a prime example of this.

Furthering research relative to synchronous online group meditation may offer significant insights into beneficial possibilities. This is particularly relevant amidst the rapid increases in technological developments in the current era and the coinciding demands for online offerings relative to both personal preference as well as the earlier noted circumstantial factors, such as economic limitations and accessibility challenges. With attention to this apparent gap in research, let us now take a closer look how Social Noting Meditation is a practice in collective presence where what arises is experienced, sensed, and acknowledged intersubjectively.

Social Noting Meditation Origins & Emergence: Potential beyond Pedagogy

In exploration of an effective and beneficial means of both teaching meditation and training together, Folk created Social Noting Meditation, which caught on in a way that Tibetan monk Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche might have referred to as “auspicious coincidence” or “auspicious connection.” (Konchok Foundation, n.d.). In the poem ‘Brilliant Moon,’ Trungpa’s friend & fellow practitioner, Dilgo Khyentse, speaks to Trungpa’s ‘auspicious coincidence’ while reflecting a conscious awareness that what may be, or what may have been perceived as separate and isolated may also be experienced as connected and non-separate:

As old man Brilliant Moon travels in the sky,

Prince Ocean of Dharma remains on the ground;

Through the illusion of circumstance, there seems to be great distance between,

In the mind’s heart-realm of one flavor, separations do not exist...

...Since in the absolute meaning there is no separation,

This self-expression of auspicious coincidence occurs...

This is the fruition of our mutual prayer not to be separated throughout our lives;

Having confidence in this, we rest in uncontrived space. (Khyentse, 2011)

This quality, or “flavor,” as Khyentse named it, of resting in “uncontrived space” where “separations do not exist” is a quality that Folk came to see could emerge in conscious awareness not only by way of silent intrapersonal practice, but also through exploring interpersonal, out loud application of a meditation practice referred to as mental noting. With the intent to better understand his student’s meditation experience and support them in their practice, Folk brought Mahasi Sayadaw’s mental noting practice out loud into relational experience. Practiced alone or interpersonally, Mahasi’s mental noting involves the following approach to meditation:

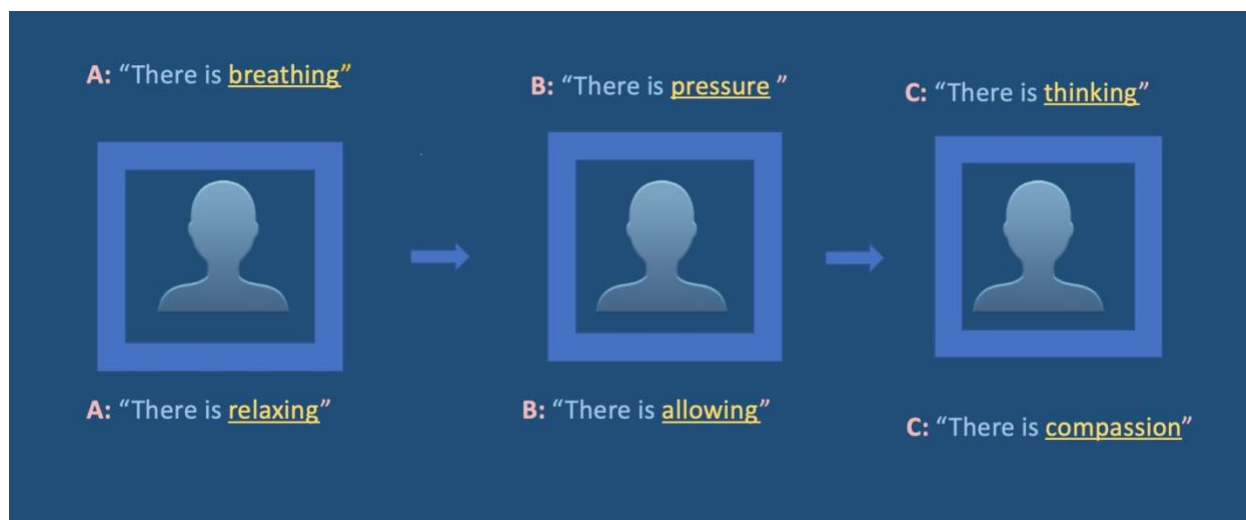
Using a simple ‘note’ to calmly name – as a whisper in the mind – what we are experiencing. It can be a useful way to interrupt the incessant flow of discursive thoughts; in contrast to most thinking, noting is not discursive: it does not involve analysis or judgement, rather we simply give our current experience a one-word label.

For example, upon hearing a sound we note ‘hearing’ without thinking further about the sound. Other common mental notes are ‘seeing’, ‘touching’, ‘feeling’, and ‘thinking.’”

(Fronsdal, n.d.)

This simple practice rooted in the Buddha’s discourse on mindfulness (the *Satipatthana Sutta*) was developed by the revolutionary Burmese Theravada Buddhist monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) (Nyi Nyi, 1978). Mahasi’s teachings of *vipassana* (insight) meditation [an ancient and codified system of training the mind through increased awareness of sensed experience (Gunaratana, 2022)] continue to be highly influential throughout both Asia and the West, particularly because they are accessible to both monks and laypeople (Bodhidhamma, 2019). This concern for accessibility is shared by Kenneth Folk, who offers “the goal is enlightenment for everyone” (Folk, 2013, as cited in Gleig, 2019, p.19).

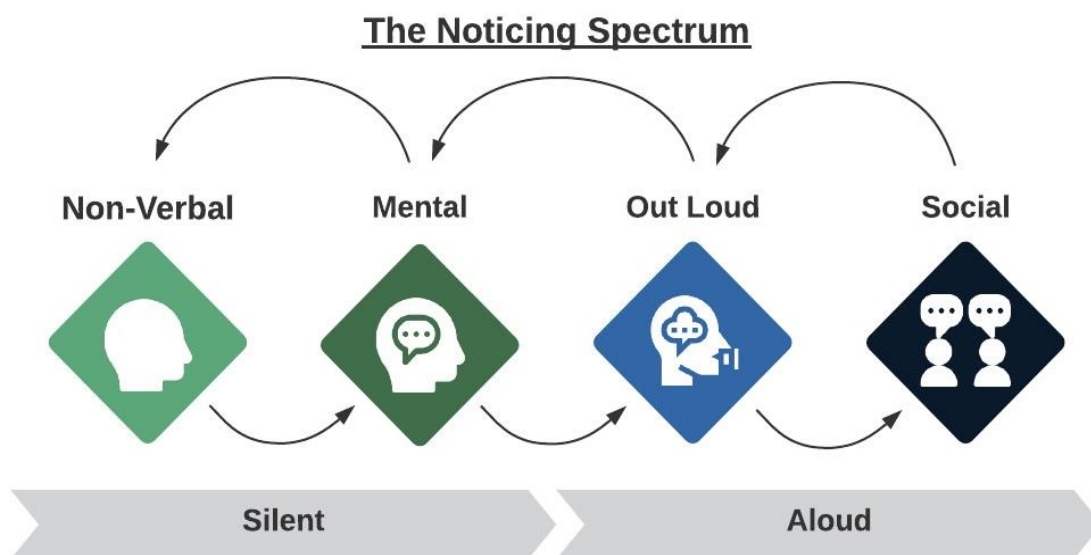
When Folk began exploring the Mahasi-noting technique in relational interpersonal application his motive was to access greater insight into his students' experience while meditating, so that he might offer more beneficial feedback. As Buddhist scholar Gil Fronsdal observes above, in individual, traditional noting practice, the experience sensed moment by moment is named quietly, internally, as "a whisper in the mind;" while in Folk's Social Noting, the "whisper" expands into relational space, where each note is offered aloud amidst a sequential cycle of turns between two or more practitioners noting what is present when it is their turn to speak. For example, see figure 1, which illustrates Folk's Social Noting Meditation practice supporting disidentification with the object of attention entitled: 'There is Noting.' With 'There is Noting,' Social Noting Meditation practitioners train the mind in intersubjective awareness by practicing noting out loud, in a group, using the practice frame "There is ___" followed by a word indicating the object of attention in direct experience at the moment of speaking.



(Figure 1: Practice Example of 'There is Noting.' Own Work)

From a pedagogical position, rather than offering his students instructions to practice independently and report back later, Folk engaged in the practice with them, in real time, both online and in-person through interpersonal noting sessions. In doing so, Folk soon discovered

that demonstrating and modeling the practice opened a first-hand sense of experience allowing for instant feedback. What is more, expanding the practice into interpersonal context not only allowed for more clarity and insight into his students' experience, it also broadened the field of meditative awareness into the intricacies of experience in relational space (see figure 2).



(Figure 2. The noting spectrum. From “The Evolution of Social Meditation,” by V.F. Horn, n.d.-a, *BuddhistGeeks*. <https://www.socialmeditation.guide/on-the-evolution-of-social-meditation>)

Whereas Mahasi’s “system demands a total dedication to keeping the attention inward, from the moment of waking until the end of the day” (Bodhidhamma, 2019), Folk’s interpersonal application of noting, broadened the context of the practice, opening it to a more expanded, inclusive awareness of that which is experienced not only inward, but also outward, and in between. In other words, expanding the field of attention to include that which is sensed in all directions. Interestingly, and perhaps in tune with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s “auspicious coincidence,” what began as a pedagogical intention soon became a sought-after, and often preferred practice among Folk’s students, who found it brought multiple benefits that both extended beyond, while still including, the benefits of individual noting practice, such as:

1. keeping the meditator present; decreased mind-wandering

2. offering a better (more accurate/clear) acknowledgement or recognition of what is occurring; sometimes this can be a kind of truth-telling
3. recognizing patterns in experience; a frequently repeated note reveals a frequently recurring experience
4. offering the thinking mind something to do rather than leaving it to its own devices
5. disentangling from being preoccupied or overidentified with experience; stepping away, seeing more clearly; providing an antidote to drowning in strong emotion or obsessive thinking, sometimes called a ‘life preserver’
6. helping maintain a non-reactive form of attention: calm equanimity
(Fronsdal, n.d.)

When reviewing the many benefits of noting meditation acknowledged above, it becomes clear that a significant aspect of the practice is the support it lends to sustaining focused attention while exercising objective awareness. Furthermore, when considering the challenge of fragmented attention that many individuals face amidst the multiplicity of distractions, heightened degree of stimulus, and rapidly increasing complexities within the digital era, it might not be so hard to understand how Mahasi Sayadaw’s noting technique offers support when applied in a peer-to-peer format. In addition to the benefits noted by Fronsdal above, the social element of practice not only offers the benefit of feedback from teacher to student, but also “the feedback loop of reporting aloud while taking turns ensures efficiency, while accountability to another human being generates motivation” (Folk, 2017-b).

Another benefit of bringing noting practice into relational space is the simplicity of noting, which makes it widely accessible to practitioners with multiple levels of meditation experience. Furthermore, practicing online opens capability for synchronous Social Meditation

practices to take place across times zones in real time, thereby expanding potential for increased diversity from session to session. On top of this, the cycling and iterating aspects of the model enhance potential for accelerated learning through the multiple learning cycles occurring throughout a single session. Here, it is significant to note how social noting demonstrates that it's not just about how much time we spend practicing, but how efficiently the learning process is supported.

In addition to supporting efficiency and motivation, broadening meditation into interpersonal space directly attends to the commonly held intention among meditators for their practice to support greater presence, responsiveness, and authenticity in relationship. As Folk observes, “we are human primates, we are social in our very bones” (Folk, 2017-b). Looking back on the birth of Social Meditation, one of Folk’s long-term students, Vince Fakhoury Horn (n.d.-a) reflects that there was “a creative explosion” that happened when Kenneth introduced social meditation; “suddenly it felt like meditation was open-ended again” awakening a welcome sense of potential, possibility, and inquiry among those who tasted it.

Horn had been studying with Folk for several years before he started practicing social meditation with him around 2010, as well as incorporating the practice in his own teaching. Since then both Folk and Horn have broadened the scope and range of Social Meditation practices exploring within and beyond basic Social Noting practices. As Horn offers, “both poles, from individual-to-social, have always been represented in the (Buddhist) tradition, but what has been added in the Western Enlightenment are the conceptual & linguistic tools needed to point out this distinction and leverage it further” (Horn, n.d.-a).

Social Meditation Protocol: Frames, Phases, Function & Possibility

Earlier we explored how Social Noting Meditation is rooted in Buddhist thought, with particular attention to Mahasi Sayadaw’s noting method. Since Kenneth Folk brought the Mahasi noting technique into relational context, many practices have emerged amidst a diverse range of inspiration from various schools of Buddhism to metamodern explorations. The practices vary in levels of complexity from beginner to advanced, with conscious consideration brought to the elements of attention and intention. While all practices noted here are designed in a way that allows for engagement both in person or online, within the context of this paper, the focus will be on online implementation. Examining this further, let’s take a moment to familiarize with the frame and protocol of Social Meditation sessions.

Social Meditation Protocol

All Social Meditation practices include the elements shown below in figure 3, all of which can be tuned toward different intersubjective effects:

The practice name: Encapsulating the practice spirit and purpose. Some basic social noting examples include: noting breath, noting body sensations, noting feeling tone (unpleasant, pleasant, or neutral), noting mind states, freestyle noting: noting any phenomena, personal or impersonal.

The practice frame: “Each social practice involves a blank space to be filled; the frame describes the linguistic context of that blank space (ex: “There is ___”).

Intention: The intention describes the ends to which we are employing our conscious attention (Ex: noting, wishing, inquiring).

Options within the frame: Options for filling in the blank of the practice frame (Ex: pick one, multiple choice, looping, succession, fixed category, relay, & freestyle).

Compression: Suggested number of words, breaths, or minutes in each note/turn.

Order: Sequential -turn based, spontaneous, relay, call & response.

Size: Number of players (minimum 2 practitioners in social practice).

Time: Number of minutes determining duration of practice.

Attribution: name(s) of the individual(s) who developed the practice.
(Horn, n.d.-b; Horn, 2022)

(Figure 3: Social Meditation Protocol. Own Work)

Phases of Practice

When considering Social Noting Meditation practice, it is important to acknowledge not only the noting itself, but the three phases of the practice, each of which has a particular function and purpose: 1) the setup phase 2) the practice phase 3) the debrief phase.

The Setup Phase: Silence, Check-in, Instructions, Safety, Demo

Upon arriving to an online session, practitioners allow a few minutes of silence as participants arrive and settle followed by state check-ins where participants share their names and how they are doing, by briefly noting their current state in a word or two, either out loud or in the chat. If practicing online, this allows opportunity to check that technology is working such as sound. Moreover, if participants are practicing from different geographical locations, the check-ins also include a mention of where participants are joining from. For example, “Hi. I’m Jennifer, I’m currently in Boston, and I’m feeling some anticipation and curiosity (or, alternatively: *There is* anticipation and curiosity).” Checking-in in this way offers opportunity to exercise mindfulness of one ‘self,’ each ‘other,’ and the group, i.e., ‘we’. Furthermore, naming and welcoming all people, states, and places present helps establish a shared sense of a group container, while also attuning to both intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. All of this helps establish a clear sense of who and what is present in the collective space while engaging in intersubjective awareness.

Next, the session facilitator relays the practice instructions followed by reminders of the safety elements of the practice: the safety release valve (as coined by Folk) and the witness role, both of which are clearly stated options in sequentially ordered noting practice where practitioners note in turns, versus spontaneously as moved.

The safety release option is a reminder to simply note: “pass,” “don’t know,” or “uncertainty” if feeling under pressure to note at any point amidst the looping cycles of practice. The safety release also reminds participants that it is perfectly okay not to know, that not knowing is a welcome experience as well, and in fact, it can be beneficial to note and name that awareness rather than forcing or over-exerting oneself in unnecessary efforting.

The witness role is offered as an option to participate silently, rather than aloud. This is supportive to participants who may be new to the practice and would like to witness silently before trying it out loud. The witness role also supports acknowledgement and inclusion of participants online who might have technical difficulties with their sound. There are also moments when, for whatever reason, a practitioner would like to join a social meditation practice session, yet they simply do not feel compelled to speak; the witness role keeps the practice open and available in these cases, cultivating an overall welcome and inclusive space in the general context of social meditation. In this way, the witness also serves as a bridge between past notions of silent meditation practice, and the current iterations of social, interpersonal, out loud practice. In all cases, these elements of Social Noting Meditation practice are intended to establish and secure a sense of safety and agency amidst the practice while preventing harm, where avoidable.

Finally, after relaying the practice instructions and safety options, the facilitator offers a brief demonstration of the practice, modeling it aloud either themselves, or inviting others present to co-demonstrate. This modeling is important as it allows new practitioners opportunity to learn by watching rather than solely through receiving abstract conceptual outlines. Moreover, modeling offers the practice facilitator space to gently model inclusive awareness of all feeling tones, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, while also demonstrating compassionate

presence and equanimity with what is noted. The session facilitator then takes any questions about the practice instructions before moving into the practice phase.

The Practice Phase

After setting up the practice, the practice phase begins with participants practicing together, often for ten to twenty-minute sessions, while facilitators may choose to offer a shorter or longer practice depending on the context, conditions, exploration, and needs of the group. If practicing online, the facilitator might keep all participants in the same virtual space, practicing together, or they may create breakout rooms.

Debrief Phase

The debrief phase often includes a brief round of post-practice check-ins offering a word or two about how it went. The debrief phase allows participants space and time to ask the facilitator any questions or share any concerns or confusions that may have arisen. This phase also offers opportunity to notice diversity in experience as well as multiplicity even amidst more simple, basic noting practices. Furthermore, this phase provides valuable opportunity to share reflections and insights, which supports both individual processing and learning, as well as collective awareness. Moreover, sharing insights and inquiries that have arisen through practice helps to integrate what has been learned into conscious awareness, thereby offering benefit in future practice contexts as well as in informal practice in daily life.

Families of Practice

While Social Meditation was born through bringing Mahasi-style noting out loud in relational context, many practices and iterations have since evolved, from basic to advanced practices. Some of these practices can be categorized in what Folk and Horn refer to as the noting family of practices (Horn, 2021), while other families of practice have emerged with

alternative intentions to noting, to take on other frames and functions such as, inquiry, embodiment/inhabiting, and inviting. Those practices that are not done with the core intention of noting but rather open to other contemplative explorations (ex: inquiry, embodiment/inhabiting, and inviting) are simply referred to under the general category of Social Meditation practices. While this thesis focuses primarily on Social Noting Meditation, a summary of the range of Social Meditation practices that have emerged according to level from basic to advanced can be explored in further detail at www.socialmeditation.guide. Meanwhile, a brief overview of basic, intermediate, and advanced Social Noting Meditation practices are offered in Appendix A.

Having established an overview of an online Social Noting Meditation session in terms of the mechanisms and protocol of Social Noting Meditation practice, we will now look more closely at how the practice exercises intersubjective awareness while strengthening capacity for sensed experience of social connection.

Exploring Co-Emergence Through Interspection

In the earlier subsection on Social Noting Meditation origins and emergence, we explored how Mahasi Sayadaw's vipassana noting practice supports mindful awareness by consciously noting aloud the current object of attention. Moreover, we saw how in Social Noting Meditation, the elements of increased motivation and accountability, alongside the collective intent for nonjudgmental attention enhances potential for a broadened scope of awareness into the simultaneous co-arising of phenomena in each passing moment of experience. Here, it is worth pausing to consider one of the most widely referenced definitions of mindfulness offered by John Kabat Zinn, founder of the internationally embraced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR). Kabat-Zinn (2013) defines mindfulness as "awareness that arises through

paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, as if our life depended on it, because it does – it’s a way of connecting with life” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, para 2).

In the case of Social Noting Meditation, the practice of connecting with life in non-judgmental presence involves more than the individual’s subjective and objective experience through introspection and extrospection; there is also an including and moreover, a turning toward experience as it is arising not only as “self” and “other,” but as “we” through the intersubjective, while meditative, nature of the practice.

While individual, solitary practice can be highly beneficial, it is still relatively limited in the sense that noted experience extends no further than the individual’s five senses and mind. Meanwhile, when practicing socially, the practice opens awareness to a more complex landscape where each participant becomes conscious to some degree of the sensed experience of their fellow practitioners. In turn, both introspection and extrospection meet in the consciously sensed experience of “we,” where the lens of being expands into the relational through intersubjectivity, a process which supports what Vince Fakhoury Horn (2021) has coined “interspection: the examination of what is in between, among, or within us” (2:17-2:28). While sitting together in silent meditation results in each individual having their own subjective experience in a shared space, Horn offers that:

The core purpose of Social Meditation is to train in interspection, developing the skills and the capacity to have a better understanding that what’s arising here, what’s arising there... it’s arising within, between, and among us... seeing the way that experience co-arises, that we each are shaping each other's experience. (5:08-5:31)

Here, Fakhoury Horn highlights how broadening noting practice into relational experience opens possibility for more extensive awareness of what is present and arising moment

by moment in the collective, interdependent, co-arising field where ‘I’ merges with ‘we,’ and that which is noted is consciously engaged with, not only in the experience of one, but of all present in collective awareness. As Cui et al. (2013) offer, “intersubjectivity constitutes the highest level of presence representing a move beyond awareness of others’ internal states into the sensation of a mutually constructed social space” (as cited in Curran & Chuang, 2022, p. 320). In this way, Social Noting practitioners bring mindful awareness to not only the individually perceived experience of humanity, but to the broader more expansive and inclusive sensed experience of shared, common humanity and interbeing. As founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, Dr. Dan Siegel (2022) offers, there is an “intraconnected” nature of human being, wherein “our body-based self—the origin of a Me—is not only connected to others but also connected within these relational worlds themselves: a We, forming the essence of belonging and a broader sense of self that forms our identity” (pp. xxi-xxii). Relative to the notion of ‘self’ broadening into a more complex relational experience sensed through belonging, founder of Integral Theory and writer on Transpersonal Psychology, Ken Wilber (2017) suggests that:

What is generally referred to as “We practices,” that is, serious group practices of group as groups, of groups taking up practices acting as a group, meant to evolve or transform or otherwise engage the entire group as a group entity, this is not just a group of individuals each doing an individual practice together, but a group practicing as a group itself. (p. 10320)

In such a space, there is not only greater possibility for recognizing, turning toward, and being with commonality in human experience, but also for opening to the diversity in experience, which includes both differences and commonality. Moreover, in recognition of the cognitive and

affective dimensions of relational being, American psychologist Jessica Benjamin (2006) offers that intersubjectivity is “a dynamic process of co-emergence of both subjects through differentiation and recognition, as a creative process where both subjects go through emotional and cognitive changes” (as cited in Zhao, 2014, pp. 20-21). Similarly, research shows that regular practice of meditation results in cognitive and emotional change (Tang et al., 2015). From here, we will explore how the relational aspect of Social Noting Meditation supports transformative insight by intersubjectively bringing attention to direct experience. while opening the heart to a sensed experience of connection.

Turning Toward Direct Experience Through Interspection

As mentioned earlier, Kenneth Folk’s Social Noting Meditation incorporates Mahasi Sayadaw’s vipassana style noting system, which is based upon the Buddha’s teachings in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, translated from Pali as the discourse on the “foundations of mindfulness.” Mahasi himself relayed the foundations as follows:

1. the contemplation of the body (including breath)
2. the contemplation of feelings (i.e., feeling tones: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral)
3. the contemplation of mind (thoughts, emotions, preferences, opinions, narrations, etc.)
4. the contemplation of mind objects (in Buddhism: The Five Hindrances, The Five Aggregates, The Six Sense Bases, The Seven Awakening Factors, The Four Noble Truths). (Sayadaw, n.d.),(Olendzki, 2004)

For the purpose of clarity, and accessibility among secular contexts, in Social Meditation the foundations are referred to as The Four Categories of Experience, and are referenced as follows:

1. Body Sensations [e.g.: tingling, aching, pressure, loosening, straightening]
2. Charge [optional notes: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral]

3. Mind States [e.g.: interest, boredom, frustration, excitement, curiosity, tenderness]
4. Thoughts in relation to the basic six senses (i.e., the five senses and the mind) [e.g.: There is aversion, there is wanting, there is remembering, there is listening].

(Horn, 2020)

In Social Noting Meditation, each of the categories have been established through a variety of practice frames. For example: Noting breath, Noting Body Sensations, Six Sense Noting, Noting Pleasant and Unpleasant, Noting Mind States, There is Noting, Freestyle Noting, etc. In all cases, practitioners note aloud in either sequential order or spontaneously in ‘pop-corn style’, depending on the size of the group and the chosen practice for the session at hand. In contemplating (i.e., noticing and sensing) the foundations/categories practitioners have the opportunity to recognize that they are foundations not only of meditation practice, but also of the very experience of being: breath by breath, moment by moment, amidst the mysterious phenomena of *this*: this being and sensing amidst curiosity and not knowing, while also knowing each momentary experience arising and falling like each breath...coming and going...in and out of experience. Furthermore, through insight into the impermanent nature of interdependent arising, the Buddha recognized that regardless of the feeling tone (i.e., charge) that accompanies what is sensed in experience, however pleasant or unpleasant, rather than turning away from what is sensed as unpleasant, or grasping onto that which is sensed as pleasant, practitioners can instead choose to open to, include, or allow whatever is sensed in awareness, turning toward it in acknowledgement while letting it through sensed experience as it arises and letting it go as it passes and falls out of sensory perception, sometimes more swiftly, and sometimes more slowly. Either way, at the start of the *Satipatthana* discourse, the Buddha relays that contemplating in these ways offers freedom from suffering: “This is the only way, monks, for the purification of

beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana [*nirvana* in Sanskrit], namely, the four foundations of mindfulness” (Nyanasatta, Thera, 2013).

As Buddhist monk and scholar Thanissaro Bhikku (2018) offers, “the practice of Satipatthana gives you greater sensitivity in peeling away ever more subtle layers of the present moment until nothing is left standing in the way of total release.” This mention of release speaks to the very act of allowing what is noted in experience to be, letting it through the passing moment of experience, while letting go of aversion toward, attachment to, or identification with whatever that experience may be. Practicing in this way is not a passive act of indifference; conversely, it is an act of agency by training not only in awareness, but in responsiveness through awareness, versus reactivity through lack of mindfulness.

By noting the emerging phenomena moment by moment, while also sensing into the spaciousness which it arises from and releases back into, the intentional practice of nonjudgmental presence allows practitioners to begin to open to what arises more objectively, thereby allowing insights to arise relative to patterns in experience; such as the above noted tendency to avert from what feels unpleasant, and the habit of clinging or attempting to hold on to what feels pleasant.

In Buddhism, this tendency toward aversion from pain and grasping to pleasure is referred to as *tanhā*, translated as craving or hunger, which the Buddha taught is one of the principle causes of suffering that arises in three ways: 1) through sense craving (i.e., the hunger for sensory pleasure), through the craving to be (i.e., the hunger for something to be), and through the craving not to be (i.e., the hunger for something not to be) (*Taṇhā*, n.d.). In all cases, *tanhā* arises both internally and externally through either conscious or unconscious desire for

experience to be different than it is. In awareness of this, the Buddha's offered the following guidance in the *Satipatthana* discourse: "In regard to the body [feelings, mind, dhammas (mind objects)] one abides contemplating the body [feelings, mind, dhammas (mind objects)] internally, or one abides contemplating [each] externally, or one abides contemplating [each] both internally and externally" (Goldstein, 2020).

Given the highly relational nature of human experience, suffering often arises in relational context. Understanding this, McCown et al. (2016) offer three main ways that *tanhā* manifests in interpersonal experience: "1) as the hunger for interpersonal pleasure and the avoidance of interpersonal pain; 2) as the hunger to be seen or acknowledged interpersonally; as the hunger to escape, to be invisible, not to engage with others, or to avoid intimacy" (p. 88).

In the context of Social Noting Meditation practice, where accountability supports both motivation and concentration, repeated notes and patterns become evident through the intersubjective feedback loop built into the multiple noting cycles throughout each practice session. Furthermore, through the intersubjective practice of returning to and noting direct sense experience, more objective awareness of reactivity and stuck patterns of behavior can emerge supporting gradual release of tensions in the body, mind, and heart. This coincidingly invites a greater sense of ease and enhanced capacity to be with the conditions that be, rather than attempting to change, fix, or eliminate the condition at hand.

From here, practitioners can experience freedom from previously conditioned notions about what does or does not belong in the human experience, and moreover, loosen once fixed notions and beliefs influencing perceptions of self, others, and life in general, including the notion of separateness. As German scholar and monk Bhikkhu Anālayo offers, practicing

mindful awareness is “to be aware of whatever there is, whether it is within us or without. And, in the end, to go beyond this division altogether” (Goldstein, 2020).

Resting in Uncontrived Space: “The Mind’s Heart Realm of One Flavor”

When practicing Social Noting Meditation, noticing what is present in actual direct experience, naming what’s perceived through mindful attention to the four categories of experience rather than through interpretation, meaning making, and conditioning, opportunity arises for conscious recognition that thoughts about what is ‘real’ or ‘true’ are in fact, oftentimes a misinterpretation of experience. As Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist monk, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, offers:

In Vipassana meditation, the meditator uses his concentration as a tool by which his awareness can chip away at the wall of illusion that cuts him off from the living light of reality. It is a gradual process of ever-increasing awareness into the inner workings of reality itself. It takes years, but one day the meditator chisels through that wall and tumbles into the presence of light. The transformation is complete. It’s called Liberation. (Gunaratana, 2022)

In the context of Social Meditation practice, there is potential for such transformation to occur, both individually and collectively, through the intersubjective experience of opening to all noted categories of experience: all body sensations, charges, mind states, thoughts, and objects of attention. By opening perception to all that is sensed and noted intersubjectively, letting the rising and falling phenomena be, not grasping at it nor averting from it, simply listening to the orchestra of notes chiming from within and without, emerging from and meeting in the field of interdependent arising, practitioners cultivate awareness of the self-identified mind, the mind of each ‘other,’ and the group mind identified as ‘we.’ Moreover, through the interspective aspect

of the practice, there is possibility for recognition of the co-arising conditions at play within, among and between all present. For example, where there is tension, anger, or fear, aversion may arise, and vice versa. Similarly, where there is happiness, abundance, or enjoyment, grasping may arise, and vice versa. Likewise, where there is compassion, there may be opening, relief, or connection; whereas, where there is judgement, there may be contracting, fear, or disconnect. As the Buddha offered in the *Vera Sutta* (the discourse on animosity), "There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones notices: When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that" (Thanissaro, 2000).

In the practice context of Social Noting Meditation, where interdependent co-arising is noted through "intersubjective communication, empathy helps transform subjects and construct a fluid and shapeable subjectivity that is always in the process of becoming" (Zhao, 2014, p. 23). In this way, the interdependent process of co-arising conditions shaping experience, both pleasant and unpleasant, also becomes more evident in conscious awareness. As Folk, (2017-a) suggests, there is "something going on as a process, and the group can awaken into shared awareness of that process *as that very process*" while also resting in the betweenness, the spaciousness in the midst of it all, the silence amidst the sound, where there is room for everything that arises in the shared space of common humanity. From here, the collective deepening of curiosity through the mutual practice of mindful engagement can support an expansion of inner and outer attunement. As McCown et al. (2016) offer, "the possibility of expanding this sense of attunement from self to others, to direct moments of experience, may emerge as the experience and definition of self becomes less a rigid narrative than an emergent process" (p. 72). Moreover, through recognition of common, shared humanity, sensed through

direct experience of mutuality, empathy can open the heart and mind to compassion and loving awareness. As Gregory Kramer (1999), founder of Insight Dialogue offers, when practicing intersubjective mindfulness:

Each member (of the practice) observes the direct experience of what is going on within themselves and in the group and gradually learns to let go of the grasping and stress that arise. As this happens, people's minds become more steady, their hearts more loving. They are increasingly attentive to what is going on, inside and outside themselves, and can be more responsive and clear. (Kramer, 1999, p.30)

Likewise, Kenneth Folk (2017-c) offers valuable reflection regarding the potential for Social Meditation to open the mind and heart,

As you see your own mind, you get more insight into the minds of other people and that empathy is the basis for compassion. So, there is a synergy between meditative insight and becoming emotionally mature (that) continues throughout practice, which is why the great sages insist that compassion and wisdom are inseparable. (Folk, 2017-c, para. 12)

In the previous section, we examined how Social Noting Meditation offers practitioners the opportunity to access awareness of the wisdom Folk mentions by recognizing and turning toward what emerges in experience with compassionate nonjudgmental presence, allowing one another to be, as is, not attempting to fix or change, but just being with, in intersubjective recognition of common humanity, experiencing knowledge of self, not solely as an independent, isolated, 'I', but rather as interdependent co-arising.

Grounded in this quality of presence, it becomes possible to at last break the cycle of ignorance, of turning away, and rather turn toward in compassion, wisdom, and equanimity where it is also possible to rest in "uncontrived space" sensing into "the mind's heart-realm of

one flavor (Khyentse, 2011)” in the company of others, allowing co-regulation to arise through mindful response, illuminating a previously unrecognized possibility in relationship: one of authentic connection beyond contrived notions of separation, in the mutual awareness of interbeing.

Given the earlier noted call for means of cultivating and enhancing sensed experience of social connection in the face of increased reports of loneliness and awareness of crisis such as the coronavirus epidemic prompting social isolation and coinciding suffering, research into the noted benefits and potential in Social Noting Practice could offer valuable insight as well as support. That said, interpersonal practices involving intersubjectivity have yet to be researched thoroughly. Therefore, in order for validity of future research, an effective and reliable means of measuring outcome of practices such as Social Noting Meditation is imperative.

Measuring Trait Mindfulness in Interpersonal Context

In a 2018 study Pratscher et al. brought attention to “mindfulness as it occurs during interpersonal interactions” (p. 1044). The primary aim of the research was to construct and implement an interpersonal mindfulness scale (IMS) (see Appendix B) in order to “delineate the construct of interpersonal mindfulness and provide empirical evidence of a scale that measures the construct” (p. 1057). The research consists of a series of 4 separate studies investigating the psychometric properties of the IMS through the gathering of qualitative and quantitative data.

Study 1 was intended to generate, develop, and refine the IMS scale in a way “that might be useful as an aggregate representation of the broad construct of interpersonal mindfulness” (Pratscher et al., 2018, p. 1046). The researchers generated items representing four theoretical categories: “Presence, Awareness of Self and Others, Nonjudgmental Acceptance, and

Nonreactivity” (p. 1044), derived from the definition of interpersonal mindfulness offered by Pratscher et al. (2018):

Interpersonal mindfulness is conceptualized as being mindful during interpersonal interactions and is briefly defined as paying attention in the present moment while with another person/s, including being aware of internal experiences (bodily sensations, thoughts, reactions, mood, etc.) and external experiences (verbal and nonverbal communication, apparent mood, etc.). Additional attitudinal qualities of interpersonal mindfulness are noticing and accepting internal reactions during social interactions and choosing to respond in a nonjudgmental way. (p. 1057)

In this first study, five sample groups totaling 2,129 participants ranging in age from 18-75 years consented to taking an online survey. The survey rated frequency of experiences relative to the above noted theoretical categories using a Likert-type scale (1 = Almost Never to 5 = Almost Always). The results of the survey informed the researchers of which items to remove in the process of refining the IMS: “Items not significantly and positively related to empathy, authenticity, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness or which were not significantly and negatively related to neuroticism” (p. 1047-1048).

In Study 2, one month after the initial survey was implemented, Pratscher et al. (2018) examined “test–retest reliability of the IMS” by administering a follow-up online survey to 127 of the original participants, with results demonstrating “high scale stability over a 1-month period” (p. 1050).

Study 3 involved another online survey focusing on the relativity of frequency of practice, years of practice, and quantity of retreats attended. The sample of 61 members of a

meditation center who took the survey demonstrated direct correlation between “in-depth meditation experience” and higher levels of IMS (Pratscher et al., 2018, p. 1051).

Finally, in Study 4, implemented surveys that “examined correlations of the IMS with [a number of] other theoretically relevant scales” (Pratscher et al., 2018, p. 1046). The scales measured a diverse array of categories within trait mindfulness (TM) such as, personality, social desirability, self-compassion, self-consciousness, active-empathic listening, emotional regulation and intelligence, authenticity, interpersonal communication competence, social connectedness, and perspective taking, relationship satisfaction, social anxiety, and empathy (pp. 1052-1053). Results of study 4 demonstrated “correlations among the subscales indicating that IMS was positively related to measures of TM” (p. 1053).

In a general discussion of their findings, Pratscher et al. (2018) suggest that “the IMS has strong psychometric properties, exemplified by good internal consistency, test–retest reliability, and construct validity” (p. 1057). Moreover, the four theoretical categories for measuring interpersonal mindfulness established by the researchers in study 1 [“Presence, Awareness of Self and Others, Nonjudgmental Acceptance, and Nonreactivity” (p. 1044)] demonstrated congruent with previously established self-report methods for measuring trait mindfulness. While this demonstrates potential for the IMS to be a valid measure for interpersonal mindfulness, it is important to note that these conclusions were based on cross-sectional and correlational studies, “limiting the ability to draw any causal conclusions that the IMS predicts theoretically meaningful outcomes” (p.1058). Also significant is the reliance upon self-report measures throughout the studies, which brings to question “whether people have the ability to accurately self-report on the items from mindfulness questionnaires, such as the frequency of their attentional lapses” (p.1058). Moreover, the majority of participants in the study sample

groups were White European Americans which presents limitations calling for a broader scope of participants. Likewise, Pratcher et al. (2018) recognize that “the scope of relationships examined in study 4 was relatively narrow (i.e., best friendships and romantic relationships)” thereby suggesting that “future research should test the IMS with respect to other types of social relationships (e.g., workplace, doctor–patient, intergroup, etc.” (p.1058). With that, while acknowledging that the conceptualization of the IMS is an “ongoing process” (p.1059), Pratscher et al. suggests that based on the findings at this stage in its development, the IMS “is valuable for assessing the capacity to be mindful while interacting with others” (p. 1059).

In response to the call to further research on “interpersonal mindfulness, especially with regard to increasing human connection and healthy relationships” (p. 1059), Medvedev et al. (2020) offered a psychometric evaluation of the interpersonal mindfulness scale using Rasch analysis with intent to “evaluate (the IMS) for compliance with fundamental principle measurement using Rasch analysis” (p. 2007). Results of their research indicate “robust psychometric properties, reliability, and internal validity of the IMS.” Furthermore, “Transformation of the ordinal IMS responses into interval-level data using Rasch conversion tables (proved to) enhance the accuracy of measurement and suitability of data for parametric statistical tests without violating their fundamental assumptions” (p. 2007).

While the observations noted thus far indicate potential for the IMS to support further research relative to mindfulness in interpersonal context, it is worth revisiting Pratscher et al.’s previously noted suggestion that “Interpersonal mindfulness is conceptualized as being mindful during interpersonal interactions and is briefly defined as paying attention in the present moment while with another person/s” (p. 1057). In accordance with this understanding, Interpersonal mindfulness refers to an individual practicing amidst an interpersonal interaction, yet this does

not imply that both parties in the interaction are necessarily practicing mindfulness, rather it refers to the application of mindfulness by a single practitioner within an interpersonal context. While studies on this are certainly not to be discarded, there is an apparent lack of attention to the outcome of more than one individual practicing mindfulness simultaneously in a relational context as seen in Social Noting Meditation. In reflection upon their findings, Pratscher et al. (2018) suggest that a central intention in developing “it is worthwhile exploring whether different contemplative practices and interventions, especially those that include dyadic or relational aspects, impact levels of interpersonal mindfulness and other downstream outcomes” (pp. 1057-1058).

Call to Future Research

In consideration of the studies and reflections explored above, several areas calling for future research can be noted. In the following subsections, I offer suggestions for future studies exploring the benefits and potential in broadening application of Social Noting Meditation, particularly in online context. In some cases, these calls to research will be applicable to other existing and potentially emerging interpersonal meditation practices exercising intersubjective awareness.

Application & Alternate Version of the Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale (IMS)

With regard to a means of measuring Interpersonal mindfulness, Pratscher et al. (2018) developed the IMS (see Appendix B) as a means of measuring trait mindfulness of an individual when engaged in general relational contexts (i.e.: when talking or texting with others; when listening to others). While this can provide valuable information, it only examines self-report data of an individual practitioner’s reflections on their own trait mindfulness when interacting with others in everyday relational contexts. The IMS does not specifically address the outcomes

of interpersonal group mindfulness practices, such as Social Noting Meditation, where two or more individuals engage in synchronous mindfulness practice either in person or online. That said, I suggest a comparative study examining the outcomes of the IMS among four groups of individuals: 1) those who have little to no experience with formal mindfulness practice 2) those who routinely practice meditation silently and alone 3) those who routinely practice meditation silently with others 4) those who routinely practice meditation out loud with others in synchronous interpersonal practice. Such a study could offer insight into the value of formally practicing mindfulness with others versus alone relative to trait mindfulness outcomes.

In a similar light, I also suggest two additional comparative studies incorporating the IMS: 1) measuring trait mindfulness in individuals who practice interpersonal mindfulness online as compared to in-person 2) measuring trait mindfulness in contemplative dyad practitioners versus Social Noting Meditation practitioners. In all cases, incorporating measures of frequency of practice among participants would support insight into what practices are not only most effective, but also most efficient in terms of cultivating trait mindfulness outcomes.

Furthermore, given that practicing online versus in person, as well as individually versus with a group involves a number of differing variables and phenomenologies, I suggest that each context requires different tools or scales for measuring mindfulness outcomes. That said, in recognition of the growing number of online interpersonal (group) meditation practices noted earlier, I suggest the development of a modified or alternative IMS questionnaire directly addressing state and trait outcomes of these practices. This would allow for more specific exploration of the effects of online group meditation practice on mindfulness outcomes in daily life. Moreover, developing a tool for measuring mindfulness specific to intersubjective group meditation practice would provide significant data relative to the potential for these practices to

cultivate social connection and prosocial skills both online and/or in person. Finally, data from research measuring outcomes of synchronous group practice could provide insight into the potential for such practices to strengthen metacognition through their implicit training in intersubjective awareness. As Hasson-Ohayon et al. (2020) suggest, “metacognition is a fundamentally intersubjective act, one in which human beings know and reflect upon themselves and others primarily with and through connections with other people” (p. 1).

Effects of Social Noting Meditation on Perceived Social Connectedness.

Given the valuable findings in Kok and Singer’s (2016) research on Contemplative Dyads, a longitudinal study on Social Noting Meditation modeled after Kok and Singer’s (2016) research would offer significant data on the outcomes of Social Noting Meditation with beginner practitioners. Likewise, a parallel study involving more seasoned meditators would offer valuable input as to any notable differences in outcomes within each population. A study as such could provide insight into any modifications to the practice or practice protocol that may support efficacy and efficiency when offering the practice to groups varying in levels of meditation experience. Moreover, if encouraging findings through viable methods surface from such a study, further interest in intersubjective meditation practices could also emerge in support of greater variety in available practice options.

Research Into Online Group Meditation Practice

Despite the widely expanding application of online mindfulness practice, there is a need for further research into online practices and their outcomes. That said, in accord with Hanley et al. (2021), future studies “comparing in-person group practice to video guided group practice (e.g., Zoom Meeting, Google Hangout) or even virtual reality group practice” (p.321), would support research into state mindfulness outcomes and social connection through online

interpersonal meditation practice. This is especially essential at current given the unprecedented shift toward online engagement in general in response to the internationally implemented social distancing restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, in reflection upon Lauricella's (2013) study demonstrating significant reports of perceived unity, cohesion, community, and collective energy, not to mention reports of greater efficiency of group versus solitary digital practice, research investigating the effects of online Social Noting Meditation on the perception of such outcomes could also support greater attention to both group and online meditation practices.

Furthermore, in resonance with Davidson and Dahl's (2017) vision of "a future where mobile technology is increasingly harnessed to both deliver Mindfulness Based Interventions and related contemplative interventions and also simultaneously used to acquire data in the field at scale" (pp. 3-4), research into the effects of practices such as Social Noting Meditation on perceived social connectedness is not only of interest, but clearly of pressing need.

Examining the Neuroscience of Social Noting Meditation

While qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and self-report surveys are commonly applied throughout the expansive body of research on meditation, reliability of such studies can vary due to limitations such as bias and positionality factors among researchers and/or participants, which may be challenging to control, let alone identify. That notwithstanding, while scientific studies also come with unique challenges and limitations, they can offer valuable quantitative data such as that found in clinical studies examining the effects of meditation on stress, depression, anxiety, and pain management. Moreover, future research on Social Noting Meditation incorporating scientific measures such as neuroimaging technology would support insight into common patterns among practitioners while providing scientific

evidence supporting self-report data. Likewise, research measuring cortisol levels pre and post practice sessions could bring further value, particularly considering the diversity of health issues linked to stress and the broad interest in stress reduction methods.

Longitudinal Study on Varying Social Noting Meditation Practice Dosages and Outcomes

Given that Social Noting Meditation can be modified in terms of duration and frequency of practice sessions, research investigating the potential benefits and drawbacks of longer versus shorter sessions could encourage greater transmission of the practice. Furthermore, research into the effects of shorter, more frequent Social Noting practice sessions versus longer, less frequent Social Noting practice sessions could support the evolution of the practice in regard to protocol and efficiency.

Trauma Awareness Relative to Group Meditation Practice

While trauma-awareness relative to meditation practice has grown extensively in recent decades, there is a lack of research regarding trauma awareness in the context of interpersonal meditation practices in person and online. That said, a study investigating trauma prevention and response in the context of both on and offline group practice would be highly beneficial in the attempt to prevent harm in such contexts, particularly given the potential for social anxiety to arise amidst such intimate settings where vulnerability may feel inevitable.

Conclusion

Throughout the years human beings have survived, thrived, and evolved through social connection. And while advances in technology have brought numerous innovative means of connecting, research shows widespread increase in reports of loneliness in recent years. Some relate these findings to the tendency toward individualism in modern societies and a relative sense of separation versus true connection. As author Charles Eisenstein (2021) offers,

“separation is woven into every aspect of our civilization. It is also unsustainable: it generates great and growing crises that are propelling us into a new era, an Age of Reunion” (Part 1, para. 1). That said, even when turning toward a more collective view, conditions such as the social distancing enforced during the coronavirus pandemic can and do still arise with adverse effects on perceived social connection. Fortunately, a number of meditation practitioners have created interpersonal practices to support sensed experience of social connection, both in person and online, while cultivating prosocial behavior.

This thesis contributes to work in the field of interpersonal and online meditation. The research I offer examines the cultivation of intersubjective awareness and social connection through online Social Noting Meditation. Although some existing studies have examined the application of mindfulness by an individual in interpersonal contexts, there has not been a strong focus on meditation where two or more practitioners simultaneously engage in intersubjective practice either in person or online. As such, this thesis differs from previous studies in that it provides insights into the value of interpersonal meditation practice where a group practices as a group, rather than individuals doing individual practice in a relational context. In addition, this work offers insight into how social connection can be cultivated online through meditative engagement. In doing so, it draws strongly on existing research exploring the effects of interpersonal practices involving digital applications on prosocial behavior and perceived social connection.

Throughout the studies examined within this paper, interpersonal meditation practices consistently demonstrated greater reports of perceived social connection, accountability, motivation, and efficacy. Moreover, these reports were highest when meditators engaged in interpersonal practices involving intersubjective awareness and perspective taking. In addition,

the research explored demonstrates that such practices cultivate and strengthen prosocial behavior such as empathy, compassion, and cooperation. Given the intersubjective element of Social Noting Meditation, these findings support rationale for future research into Social Noting practice as a means of cultivating these qualities. This thesis also addresses the need for a reliable means of measuring interpersonal mindfulness by examining an existing scale for measuring interpersonal mindfulness, identifying current limitations, and offering suggestions for future research. If actively acknowledged, these suggestions will support viable outcomes of research into interpersonal practices offered both in person and online.

In short, this thesis serves as a call to future research into online Social Noting Meditation practice, which I suggest strengthens intersubjective awareness while cultivating social connection. Resonant with the increasing demand for online meditation practices alongside concerns regarding social isolation and increasing reports of loneliness on a global scale, Social Noting Meditation offers online practices involving intersubjective engagement accessible to both novice and seasoned practitioners. Moreover, through mutually engaged presence Social Noting Meditation practitioners have the opportunity to sense into the relational field of interdependent co-arising, where awareness of profound connection invites release of misguided interpretations of a separate isolated self while exercising conscious recognition of interbeing. From here, practitioners are able to broaden the individualistic view of self into a more collective understanding of identity, potentially prompting individuals and communities toward greater interpersonal presence, empathy, cooperation, and compassionate action for the mutual benefit of all beings everywhere. May this thesis encourage future research into such potential and may the collective experience of interbeing arise.

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Appendix A

Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Social Noting Meditation Practices

Basic Practices

- Basic Noting (as described earlier), created by Kenneth Folk
- There is Noting (“There is ____”), created by Kenneth Folk
- I Am Noting (“I am ____”), created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Noting is Like This (“____ is like this”), created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Noting Mind (“____ mind”), created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Noting Body (“____ body”), created by Kuan Luo
- Just Noting (“Just ____”), created by Vince Fakhoury Horn

Intermediate Practices

- Noting Pleasant & Unpleasant, created by Kenneth Folk
- Noting Thoughts, created by Kenneth Folk
- Single Parameter Noting, created by Kenneth Folk
- Essence Noting, created by Kenneth Folk
- Jhanic Noting, created by Kenneth Folk
- Progressive Release Noting, created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Zen Noting, created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Zen Relay Noting, created by Ryan Oelke and Lisa Sherman
- Bahiya Noting, created by Vince Fakhoury Horn

Advanced Practices

- Zen Release Noting, created by Vince Fakhoury Horn
- Progressive Release Essence Noting, created by Vince Fakhoury Horn

*Further details on the above practices can be found at www.socialmeditation.guide.

Appendix B

Interpersonal mindfulness scale

Instructions: Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experiences with other people. Using the scale, please indicate how frequently you have each experience. Answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be. Treat each item separately from every other item (1 = Almost never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Frequently, 5 = Almost Always).

1. When I am with other people, I am aware of my moods and emotions.
2. When I am conversing with another person, I am fully engaged in the conversation.
3. When in a discussion, I accept others have opinions different from mine.
4. In tense moments with another person, I am aware of my feelings but do not get taken over by them.
5. When a person is talking to me, I find myself thinking about other things, rather than giving them my full attention.
6. When I receive an angry text/email from someone, I try to understand their situation before responding.
7. I listen for the meaning behind another person's words through their gestures and facial expressions.
8. When I am upset with someone, I notice how I am feeling before responding.
9. I listen carefully to another person, even when I disagree with them.
10. I find myself listening to someone with one ear while doing something else at the same time.
11. I take time to form my thoughts before speaking.

12. I think about the impact my words may have on another person before I speak.
13. When interacting with someone I know, I am often on autopilot, not really paying attention to what is actually happening in the moment.
14. When I am with another person, I try to accept how they are behaving without wanting them to behave differently.
15. I am aware of others moods and tone of voice while I am listening to them.
16. I am aware of my facial and body expressions when interacting with others.
17. When I am with others, I am easily distracted and my mind tends to wander.
18. When interacting with others, I am aware of their facial and body expressions.
19. I pick up on the intentions behind what another person is trying to say.
20. I listen to another person without judging or criticizing them.
21. I give the appearance of listening to another person when I am not really listening.
22. Before I speak, I am aware of the intentions behind what I am trying to say.
23. When I am interacting with another person, I get a sense of how they are feeling.
24. I accept that another person's current situation or mood might influence their behavior.
25. Rather than being distracted, it is easy for me to be in the present moment while I am interacting with another person.
26. When speaking to another person, I am aware of how I feel inside.
27. I notice how my mood affects how I act towards others.

Note: Randomly order the items when administering the scale. Scoring: * Indicates reverse scored item.

To compute a total interpersonal mindfulness score, reverse score the indicated items (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) and calculate a mean.

Coding key:

Presence items: 2, 5*, 10*, 13*, 17*, 21*, 25.

Awareness of Self and Others items: 1, 7, 15, 16, 18, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27.

Nonjudgmental Acceptance items: 3, 9, 14, 20. Nonreactivity items: 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 22.

(Pratscher et al., 2018, pp. 1059 & 1060)