

# **Counseling Research as Caring: Lessons from Group Contemplative Practice**

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## **Abstract**

This study models counseling research as a social action process while highlighting multicultural counselor identity. Seven co-researchers/participants possessing a shared counselor identity engaged in a community-based reflexive contemplative practice group which aimed at dismantling the power imbalance that normally exists between researchers and participants while remaining cognizant of the insidious influence of white supremacy in the research process. The data collected represents the content and process reflections on participating in this group which invited contemplation about identity on many different levels. Several themes emerged from the data as did implications for counseling research and practice.

*Keywords: community-based participatory action research, reflexive research, contemplative research, decolonizing research, multiculturalism and social justice*

## **Counseling Research as Caring: Lessons from Group Contemplative Practice**

Mainstream academic research has long been problematized by scholars working from feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial perspectives due to its historical and contemporary minimization and devaluation of minoritized voices (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021; Ziai et al., 2020; Kenton et al., 2016; Smith, 2012; Dotson, 2012). Most counseling researchers are affiliated with colleges and universities which are viewed by critical scholars as institutional extensions of the larger colonial apparatus (Verhaeghe et al., 2018). The seminal work of Smith (2012) chronicled the long history of colonialist white settlers' use of research to exploit and brutalize Indigenous communities. Consequently, potential participants who belong to marginalized groups may be hesitant to work with researchers due to realistic fears of being exploited by the research process or misrepresented in research reports (Hamilton, 2019).

After the codification of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), Hays (2020) invited an inquiry specific to counseling research methodology. Hays (2020) identified several principles which characterizes multicultural and social justice-competent counseling research, including self-awareness, knowledge of participants' worldviews, the establishment of mutually beneficial research relationships with participants, and engagement in advocacy through research activities. Within a social justice-competent research process, minoritized voices can have a space for exploring their experiences, creating knowledge, and sharing power. This is crucial as counseling research is subject to the same dynamics of power which may play a role at the personal, relational, and collective levels of research across all academic disciplines (Prilleltensky et al., 2008). Following Hays, the purpose of the present article is to share the authors' experiences in assembling and participating in a community-based reflexive contemplative practice group which aimed at exposing and altering the power imbalance that normally exists between researchers and participants while remaining cognizant of the insidious nature of white supremacy in the research process. What follows is a short exploration of oppression in academic research and some possible methodological antidotes.

### **Antidotes to Oppression in Counseling Research: Reflexivity & CBPAR**

Smith (2012) viewed colonialism as embedded in the "craft of research as canonized in [academic] research methods and methodologies" (Ziai et al., 2020, p. 3). Such canonization of colonialism in the academy leads to white supremacy and "epistemic racism" which manifests as "non-representation," "silencing," devaluing, and stereotyping of scholars of color (Ziai et al., 2020, p. 2). Institutionalized forms of oppression have led scholars to call for the decolonization of the academy aiming to dismantle the "hegemonic white cisheteropatriarchal framework" that constrains the operation of research activities (Buggs et al., 2020, p. 2) in multiple ways and across multiple levels (Buchanan, Perez, Prinstein & Thurston, 2021; Carnethon et al., 2020). Two research practices that strike at the heart of colonizing research practices are reflexivity and community-based participatory action research (CBPAR).

In the 1970s, CBPAR emerged as a new research approach to address the failings of mainstream research (Minkler, 2000). Rather than mandating a specific process, CBPAR is an overarching paradigm which encourages researchers to engage with community partners to identify, understand, and address community problems in meaningful and culturally congruent ways (Horowitz et al., 2004). A CBPAR approach emphasizes that individual stakeholders from the community work together in the research process on acute and enduring social issues to truly recognize and address the community challenges (Fine, 2018). This approach, therefore, is intended to increase mutual understanding of all parties involved in the research project by developing shared knowledge of the cultures, experience, and individual needs of all parties (Robinson et al., 2019). In CBPAR, power and autonomy of community members is emphasized as well as equitable power relations and active sharing of benefits resulting from the research.

Reflexivity exemplifies a powerful tool to counter patriarchal and racist practices (Fine, 2018) and represents a foundational principle of Indigenous research methods (Hays, 2020). Levitt et al. (2018) described reflexivity as “self-examination.... about [researchers’] influence upon research process” (p. 28). Self-examination should lead to self-disclosure whereby researchers declare their “relationship[s] to the study topic, with their participants, and to related ideological commitments [that] may have bearing on the inquiry process” (p. 29). Reflexive research is considered a method of enhancing rigor through transparency about the influence of the researchers’ backgrounds on their interpretations and constructs.

In addition to enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, reflexivity is also a practice for researchers to honor and care for themselves and others involved in the research process (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity can allow researchers to engage participants using a decolonized approach to research by encouraging various ways of communication, participation, and input and recognizing upfront ways to minimize unequal power dynamics and understandable mistrust given the academy’s history of the exploitation of participants. CBPAR and reflexivity represents two antidotes to colonizing, exploitative research practices that are highly congruent with a multicultural and social justice-competent approach to research (Hays, 2020). One of the intersections of CBPAR and reflexivity in the project reported in this article is contemplative practice. We explore the use of contemplative practice in social science research in the section to follow.

### **Contemplative Practice and Social Science Research**

Giorgino (2015) emphasized the usefulness of contemplative practice within social science research. Contemplative practice is an umbrella term for methodical/ritual actions that are based on longstanding spiritual/religious traditions. Generally, they aim to cultivate wisdom by guiding practitioners to focus on present moment phenomena. Mindfulness, perhaps the most well-known and well-researched, is an example of a contemplative practice presented with different degrees of intactness to its traditional roots (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Other practices span meditation, movement, speech, and song in individual and communal variations. Contemplative practices invite honesty about embodied, interactional and presence-based experiences (Giorgino, 2015). In order to lead with honesty, which connects CBPAR, reflexivity, and contemplative practice, we offer the following statement of bias.

### **Statement of Bias**

This project took place within the auspices of a research center whose mission is to “expand what is considered valid in the current body of knowledge in mental health research to include all the ways in which wisdom is cultivated and shared” (Holistic Research Center, n.d.). Drawing upon critiques above, participants strived to maintain continual awareness of the ways in which our socialization and location within academia contributes to conscious or unconscious ways that we legitimized Western, colonial, white, and male-centric ways of interacting, generating knowledge, and writing about our experiences. Participants wished to engage in research in a way that felt fresh and relevant yet also worried that our intentions might not be welcomed in mainstream counseling journals.

In this article, the third person plural, *we*, is used to express the voice of the co-researchers. *We* represent statements that we have all reviewed and accepted as valid to represent each of our voices. While in some instances the use of *we* can hide researcher subjectivity, or to erase the voices of marginalized or vulnerable people, we wish to assert that our *we* represent our expression of this experience following a careful, reflexive, and consensus-based process among authors. Finally, our *we* is limited to the seven authors of this article. As the reader, you are invited to decide how our *we* speak to you.

### **Rationale**

Through the current study, we present to the academy one example of a method for counselors and counselor educators to engage with issues of colonization and white supremacy in the context of a caring, voluntary, contemplative practice group that existed outside of the context of formal coursework, training, supervision,

or consultation. This group attempted a more egalitarian process between co-researchers/co-participants. By participating in this reflective group experience, we sought to identify whether using contemplative practice, reflexivity, and CBPAR could generate meaningful findings with regards to an exploratory research question while remaining aware of the normative dynamics of academic research that were critiqued above. For counselors and counselor educators interested in multicultural and social justice-competent research (Hays, 2020), this project may inspire implementation of future decolonizing research approaches such as the use of contemplative practice groups.

## Method

### Research Design

This study invited a blend of CBPAR and Reflexive Research (Fine, 2018). The Facilitating Researcher chose contemplative practice (Giorgino, 2015) as the topic for group study. The group was established with an egalitarian process amongst all participants with an assumption that there was no one expert in the room, and an openness to everyone's ideas and opinions. During the group process, group explorations were collected using reflexive responses. In this article, we use the terms co-researchers, participants, and group members interchangeably. An exploratory question opened the reflective process: *what can be learned from using a combined methodology of CBPAR and self-reflexive research with a contemplative practice group?* As this group process developed, the focus shifted to implications relevant to social justice-competent counseling research (Hays, 2020).

### Participant/Co-researcher Recruitment

After the study received IRB approval, a call for participation was made through CESNET and through the Holistic Research Center's community listserv. The Facilitating Researcher sent out a recruitment email asking possible participants to join a research group involving community-based participatory action research and reflexivity. Potential CBPAR group participants would participate in contemplative practices and become co-creators of the group process. As an incentive, a \$25 gift card was offered. As part of the recruitment process, interested participants were invited to send a social location paragraph to the Facilitating Researcher and to the Program Officer. The goal was to create a group of eight people (the Facilitating Researcher, Program Officer, and six other co-researchers) that maximized the sense of diversity present in the group, yet would be manageable in terms of co-creating and tracking an egalitarian group experience.

### Participants

The Facilitating Researcher and the Program Officer selected six participants from an initial group of 14 respondents. Each participant was selected because they added a degree of diversity to the group (see Appendix A). The participants were sent a follow-up welcome letter to the study, while the other potential participants were sent a waitlist email. After the first week of the study, one of the selected participants chose to discontinue participation in the group. Since the remaining participants already spent two hours bonding and orienting, we decided to continue the study with seven participants. Table 1 summarizes some of the main identifiers of the participants.

### Procedure

We began meeting online over Zoom in January 2020. We agreed that meetings would take place biweekly for 1-1.5 hours through May 2020 (approximately four months). We decided that members would take turns introducing a question or idea for the group to contemplate both during the Zoom meeting and between meetings. Each Zoom meeting began with a check-in. We briefly shared events that were happening and impacting our lives. We also shared our written and verbal reflections on the contemplative question that was proposed during the previous meeting. Our check-ins and reflections were recorded by the notetaker. Next, another member of the group presented a new question for contemplation. This cycle continued over the course of the four-month group

process, with each group member sharing one question central to their interests and experiences (see Appendix B). Each meeting closed with a statement of intention for the weeks to come and/or a statement of gratitude.

### **Data Collection**

Responses and comments made at each meeting were recorded in a shared Google document. Specifically, the Program Officer took down notes during the meetings which were shared immediately over Google Docs. Group members had the opportunity to write comments into the notes to ensure meaning was maintained. Likewise, responses to the contemplative questions between meetings were recorded in the shared document. In this way, everyone processed their own thoughts and meanings while simultaneously allowing other group members to read, reflect, and share comments on the same document. This collective document served as the data for this study as it tracked our reflections throughout this group experience.

#### ***Trustworthiness***

Multiple steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data collected and analyzed during this process. Our examination of this study's quality is guided by Morrow (2005), who offered criteria for the documentation of trustworthiness across research designs, to include social validity, addressing subjective/reflexive aspects of research, and ensuring adequacy of data and interpretation. In order to increase confirmability, the group members went through a process of defining all the necessary terms of participation, including contemplative, reflexivity, practice, and even research. Defining these terms allowed for a shared understanding of the research process while exposing latent biases. This process of defining was a cornerstone of the authenticity and equity of this research process.

To address social validity and subjectivity/reflexive aspects of the research (Morrow, 2005), we began this research process by making our biases explicit with each other, sharing social location information about multiple identities, and discussing guidelines for sharing in a multicultural space (EBMC, n.d.). All notes and reflections were accessible to the whole group to share comments and thoughts about the other entries. This sharing of information contributed to the idea of transparency and fairness in our data collection and review.

To ensure the adequacy of the data/interpretation (Morrow, 2005), a consistent group member (the Program Officer described above), wrote down the comments and exemplar statements during each group process session. Having one person complete this task helped to maintain consistency in reporting/communication style as well as represented an attempt to reduce confirmation bias in the group. Moreover, participants had the opportunity to correct any misrepresentation of ideas in the collective document.

## **Results**

This section represents the analytical process bringing epistemological reflexivity to a community-based participatory action research model. The themes for reflection were suggested by the Facilitating Researcher, and then reviewed and accepted by the co-researchers. Different group members took the lead on reflecting on the different themes listed below before participants were able to amend the reflections in the editing process. In this next section, we offer joint reflections on overarching themes to potentially integrate social justice competencies (Hays, 2020) into counseling research.

### **Reflections on Diversity**

The group represented diversity in terms of gender, culture, current religion/spirituality, sexuality, and career stage. Meaningful degrees of diversity added to the variety of ideas shared in the group discussions and contemplative reflection on the questions. There was diversity in terms of counselor identity development; however, we did not explore clinical backgrounds or counseling theory perspectives, so this may or may not have been another area of difference. There was a variety in family makeup and situation in terms of children, partners, and levels of connection with extended family members.

Each group member was given space to share during periods of group reflection. All group members had equal access to the meeting notes. Some questions guided us to explore identity in a more general sense, while other questions invited a more intimate look at a specific aspect of identity. For example, the question asked by Kari in week two began with, “How do I balance and live with both absolute and relative truths?” Anthony’s week one question was more specific, “What would the world be like without gender?”

Politically, it appeared that our group skewed liberal as our opinions tended to lean to the left when it came to social issues. However, political affiliation was not explicitly discussed in the group. In terms of ethnicity, most of the participants identified as white, thus we did not successfully decentralize Whiteness in our process. Skewing young, there was a 20-year age range in the group. All of us had some training in multicultural issues in counseling, including an analysis of privilege and oppression in society. Though the topic of academic culture arose, we sparingly discussed our individual positionalities in the academic context. On reflection, this seems to have been a missed opportunity, and perhaps a symptom of the strength of the Eurocentric academic bubble.

### **Reflection on Social Context**

This study began when the COVID-19 pandemic was heating up in the media as the first cases were being reported in the United States. By the time we reached our third meeting on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, we were all under shelter-in-place orders in our respective cities. There was a unanimous consensus to continue as planned. Since the group was conceived to meet over Zoom, we continued meeting without any interruption. Within shelter-in-place, the group took on an added layer of connection that seemed more pronounced and essential to the process. For example, during the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, Zvi brought the point that, “so much came up this week around equity and safety, and what it means to return to slowness and compassion and kindness during this time [COVID].”

Equally impactful was the murder of George Floyd on May 25<sup>th</sup> by a Minneapolis police officer. Floyd’s death, contextualized within the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized the disproportionate impact of police brutality on Black people. Our final meeting of this group was on May 26<sup>th</sup>. We were just waking up to the news and to the strong ripple effects that this murder would have on our communities and the world. The final reflection meeting was a mixture of gratitude and confusion. The group served a function to hold intimate space. For example, Dalad shared, “I really appreciated seeing how everyone has their own struggle, their own way of thinking, and their own experience,” and Kari stated, “I am struggling with a lot of sense of shame and guilt and confusion. I really appreciated the opportunity to talk to others and hear about how people interpret the questions in their own lives; this has been meaningful.”

The group check-ins served as a place to share about family issues, professional issues, and personal issues that had arisen during this time. As the group was set up with an eye towards diversity, it became a place to consider the various ways in which this pandemic was impacting different communities. There was a felt sense of care and concern for each other, for our families, and our communities. We considered our authentic responses to the inequities exposed to increase our connection with our surroundings. Having others to share personal views helped each member to appreciate the function of environmental events in shaping outlook. By increasing a sense of awareness about surroundings, each participant expressed a connection of social situations to general well-being.

### **Reflection on Leadership**

A key goal of this research project was to challenge the power dynamics that are present in research. We considered power in how the group would conduct itself, how we would gather and organize the data, and how the data would be analyzed and shared. This project was conceived in the mind of one Facilitating Researcher, and thus it was not a perfect egalitarian process. Due to academic socialization, the Facilitating Researcher was still considered the Primary Investigator (PI). This truth caused others in the group to hold back opinions or reactions at times, as there was an unspoken and unaddressed rule that ultimately the direction of and dissemination of the project rested with the PI.

The Facilitating Researcher, with the help of the Program Officer, developed the main focus of the study around contemplative practice and formulated the IRB proposal before recruiting the other co-researchers. By the time co-researchers were invited into the study, research preparation was already completed with the main theories already chosen the idea of diversity already in place, and a semi-structured plan for the kick-off meeting. The Facilitating Researcher also loosely conceived the group process (described above) as a suggestion, which the group accepted. Consequently, opportunities for the entire group to shape the foci of this research study and frameworks to be utilized were limited.

Throughout the process, the Facilitating Researcher aimed to increase the sense of leadership among participants. In an effort to increase a sense of shared responsibility for reflection and participation we did the following: (1) each group member presented a question for contemplation, (2) we used a shared reflection document accessible to all group members, and (3) group members were able to motivate and guide different possibilities for sharing the outcomes of this study. The Facilitating Researcher reflected on “How do I become aware of my need to lead when things feel still? How do I deal with hierarchy and leadership without getting caught in it? How can I be who I am in a present way, but not in a controlling or overpowering way?” The intention for shared leadership continued until the end in deciding if the research would be submitted for publication. For example, Anthony stated, “I genuinely enjoy writing for publication and sharing my thoughts with others—but if that does not feel useful or helpful to others, then I am happy to have simply learned from the perspectives and stories of others.”

### **Reflection on Contemplative Practice**

The opening line to the study’s recruitment email stated, *You are invited to take an active part in a unique research study by participating in a community of contemplative practitioners to learn about themselves, each other, and the world, through an online contemplative practice group.* Therefore, contemplative practice was both a criterion and an action for this research group. In order to increase diversity in contemplative practices, its definition was left vague for participants. Contemplative practice was left vague in its definition in order to increase the likelihood of group diversity when it came to contemplative practice. This indeed manifested, as the group member’s contemplative practices were drawn from a spectrum of Buddhist, Yogic, Christian, Jewish, and nonreligious sources. Moreover, contemplative practices also varied with some group members engaging in specific rituals at specific times, while others engaged in contemplative practices in a more informal way. Zvi reflected that he “practiced this question mostly by dropping it into meditation and seeing what happens in the body.” Whereas Ryan shared that “through contemplative practices, such as Taizé prayer, mindful walking (and mindful exercise), yoga, contemplative reading of sacred writings that I was able to address my burnout and begin to witness and understand my own internal reactions to being a human service professional.” Each member shared their own unique engagement with contemplative practice while the group also engaged in contemplative practice together.

### **Reflection on Questions Posed for Contemplative Exploration**

A key feature of the group was accepting a question for a two-week period, offered by a particular group member (See Appendix B.). There was a lot of variety in how the group members brought these questions into contemplation. Some group members used the questions as a mantra for a formal sitting practice, while others used prayer or movement to explore the questions. Still other members simply gravitated towards the question when they were able to see how it reflected in their daily life. As each group member implemented their chosen contemplative practice as an avenue to explore the prompted question, the focus of deeper reflexive exploration as a group process emerged over time.

Even drafting, selecting, and presenting each question was a representation of reflective practice. From the first meeting, the group discussed expectations of being mindful of immediacy and how each question evolved from different identities. Similarly, each presented question was an extension of each participants’ perspectives and

narrative that influenced the reflective practices of other members. In the second meeting, the power of questions was discussed recognizing that “questions will be individually/personally inspired and therefore will bring about new perspectives” (Erin) while each member has “different ways to process and answer questions depending on their style/way of thinking.” (Yuleinys)

Each participant asked important questions about personal growth, either as a theme in our lives or as an issue that was present for the questioner. The questions revealed information about our values, attitudes, and beliefs calling us more deeply into each other’s lives with the care of a contemplative stance. Some questions were more pointed, while others were more global. The questions varied in their focus to the immediate group experience. Some questions invited us to first consider our identities more overtly, while others allowed identity to weave itself in more organically. The differences in the questions provided a window into the interests of the group members.

The same question did not mean the same to each person. After a question was presented, we held a discussion to see where we might locate ourselves in the question. These positions did vary on several questions. For example, as Erin used the terms vocation and calling in her question, each group member had to consider how to understand these constructs. The diversity of the questions, mixed with the diversity of the interpretations of the questions, added richness to the practice. Understanding that one question could have multiple answers helped us to better understand each other’s perspectives.

### **Reflections on Insights**

Engaging in this group’s contemplative reflexive process led to insightful experiences. Insights were understandings that caused surprise, fostered self-awareness, or increased empathy for our lived experiences. One such insight was that our manner of relating to one another shifted from a friendly professionalism to a caring professionalism rather quickly. We began each group meeting with a personal check-in where each member shared within their own comfort zone. In time, we reached a warmth of connection that broke the boundaries of the often-considered cold research stance through the lens of caring.

From our first meeting, the group noticed that being part of the group process would bring us to consider the question, “What changes by just being present?” (Yuleinys). We considered the value of noticing the different ways we are in groups and more generally in our lives to recognize the impact on others and self. We were able to experience the power and change that happens with simple awareness and presence, rather than necessitating verbal expression. We encouraged one another to notice urges to speak or refrain from speaking, and to allow ourselves space to find meaning and make choices during both silence and speaking.

Another area of insight was noticing the organic development of questions over time. There was a shared experience that the group contemplative practice during meetings flowed from the previous week’s discussion to the new question. By creating a structure that allowed for openness, there was also space for a natural unfolding. We were able to see the way in which co-creativity can be facilitated with a balance of structure and spontaneity.

Conversely, several group members noted (both during group meetings and during the manuscript preparation) that the Facilitating Researcher’s efforts to create a sense of safety and respect for each members’ contributions may have ironically created a degree of interpersonal distance within the group. Specifically, our group tacitly agreed to structure our biweekly check-ins and verbal responses to previous and upcoming contemplative questions prompts with limited feedback from others beyond gratitude for their perspective. We now worry that this structured manner of sharing may have inadvertently fostered an environment where microaggressions of various kinds could have gone unaddressed. Some group members also expressed a desire to know and understand fellow group members at a deeper level, which might have been accomplished more readily through a less structured approach to facilitation. We encourage those who wish to utilize and adapt our format to utilize a model of group facilitation which fosters greater interpersonal risk-taking by inviting the members to express curiosity about others, ask follow-up questions regarding others’ statements, and share genuine reactions to others’ stories.



## Reflection on Disagreement

As discussed above, one of the questions around vocation took group members in different directions. Some of us moved towards a theistic notion of vocation, while others wrestled with the notion of vocation in a more humanistic sense. As we discussed our reason for being in the counseling field and even more broadly a caregiver, Ryan explained, “After diving into Catholic spirituality during my time as a volunteer in Sacramento, the idea of calling or vocation became clearer as I got acquainted with lay and religious people who had committed to a life of service.” In contrast, Yuleinys expressed, “I tend to think about my job as a vocation, but it can also be a career... I do embrace my role as an educator to influence a sense of purpose not only for me but for students as we work very closely with others.”

Another area of divergence was how different group members considered their gender expression within their own culture. For some of us, gender—especially when it comes to how we perform and express our gender—is more flexible, while other group members maintained a more essentialist sense of gender within their cultural context. For example, Anthony shared, “what a world would look like if we didn’t see people as women, men, or trans or non-binary, but just as individual people who had different bodies that could do different things and had different needs, it just feels so much more freeing to me,” while Dalad wrote, “If the world has no gender, I must be lost.” The spectrum of how gender was held by different group members created different starting points to questions that invited contemplation of identity in a more overt fashion.

There were a few different focal points for group members that added to the context of our contemplative group practice. Some group members seemed to focus on the very here-and-now process of the group, reflecting on the quality of the connection between group members. There was a looming question, *are we really getting to know one another in this context?* Another focus was on the potential transformation of group members through the group process. *How will I and/or we be different after this process?* There also was a focus on the method itself. *Are we doing this right? What will be the value of this study? And for whom?* Thus, these different focal points, among others led group members down different paths of inquiry, interest, and exploration.

## Discussion and Recommendations

This article reports the findings of seven co-researchers/co-participants who engaged in a caring, voluntary, and contemplative practice group which sought to generate findings across a variety of topics relevant to multicultural and social justice-competent research (Hays, 2020). Considering social and cultural movements, our group explicitly sought to blend CBPAR and self-reflexive research to resist white supremacist, patriarchal, and colonialist research practices. We share our findings and reflections upon the research process to inspire others, including counseling researchers and educators, interested in utilizing contemplative practice groups as a means of engaging in more equitable, transparent, and mutually beneficial research relationships (Hays, 2020).

While it is questionable whether decolonized research is possible within academia (Buggs et al., 2020; Ziai et al., 2020), we aimed to create spaces for open discourse and multiple perspectives using reflective practices that foster insight and participation in research. Our study highlighted some of the deeper challenges to conduct research that is free of Euro-patriarchal norms.

Though diversity plays a vital role in multiple levels in academia, training, and practice, the reflexivity in this study reinforced an imperative to recognize and welcome varied perspectives that increase a sense of awareness and connectedness to others. By allowing individual representations of mindfulness, a space of sharing and caring enabled learning about different practices and viewpoints. Moreover, reflective questions and responses increased a sense of respect, empathy and validation among participants. In counseling research, reflective questions could foster spaces for diversity and social justice practices needed for improved social context.

Another significant outcome of this reflective group experience was the power of being part of a group. The group process was significant for each member to understand their role in the group but also the consequences of being in this group. In practice, teaching, and research, counselors could benefit from taking time to be reflective

about their group memberships. This shared group experience resulted in an increased awareness about each person's responsibility in their role in the group.

Our research recommendations may also have clinical implications. Using greater collaboration and reflection in research could lead to increased relevance to the counseling community. Oftentimes, researchers in our field are serving clients and teaching counseling students. Integrating the values of equality and a non-hierarchical framework in a group process, as discussed in this article, creates the possibility of passing them along in counseling sessions and in the academe itself.

Our study offers a model of research as caring. With the help of group reflexivity, our process transcended analytical inquiry and accessed a heart-centered ritual of listening and being with each other during a time of collective unrest. The experience of nurturing the tribe or village (Smith, 2012) as part of the research paradigm benefited our group of co-researchers. Caring can be adopted as a central pillar in social justice infused research as a statement of professional values and the guiding mission of our therapeutic field. Caring invites in a thoughtfulness for how a study is conceived, how researchers present and carry themselves, how participants are recruited and tended to, and how knowledge produced is shared and applied.

### **Study Limitations and Next Steps**

This study was inspired by CBPAR practices (Hacker, 2012) in which co-researchers worked together to generate knowledge related to a co-designated research question. However, several elements of CBPAR were not present in this study. Specifically, the Facilitating Researcher invited a group of co-researchers/participants into a community process of self and group reflection, which is different from CBPAR. The Facilitating Researcher did guide the study and shaped certain aspects of the study. Accordingly, it can be argued that we never truly reached a breakdown of the researcher/participant divide. Lastly, with all qualitative methods, generalizability is not the goal. Our study, like many other qualitative studies, will not stand up to modernist conceptions of precise replicability. Instead, our goal in sharing our experiences in forming and participating in a contemplative, reflexive, anti-racist practice group was to offer one imperfect model to potentially inspire innovation in multicultural and socially just research in counseling.

Our group experience emphasized multiple perspectives that were shaped into a collaborative voice. However, multiple limitations existed that impinged upon our ability to craft a truly equal relationship between all co-participants/co-researchers, despite our intentions. For instance, a need to get approval from an IRB before recruiting participants meant that an inflexible hierarchy was already in place. A potential route might have been to determine if our study could have been exempt from IRB approval given that we were all co-researchers. The issue with this route was that it would have communicated that our project was not research. We faced a catch-22; if we wanted this project to be considered research, a hierarchical structure was necessary, and if we wanted to avoid this structure, we would need to sacrifice the label of research. We are not advocating, however, against structure or institutional research oversight, nor are we implying that hierarchy does not exist outside of colonization; rather, this project highlighted the reality that the hierarchy within colonized research is accompanied by an embedded and inflexible power structure that can set the researcher (in this case, the Facilitating Researcher) apart from the community.

Internalized academic norms also could have influenced our expressed hesitation in leading discussions and decisions related to efforts to present and publish these findings. Our study is an invitation for researchers to consider how to disrupt harmful dynamics by including CBPAR and reflexive principles in research designs. These principles can be helpful in illuminating the invisible dynamics of power (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009; Hacker, 2012) by increasing the equity in group experiences and offering the opportunity for ongoing care and compassion for each group member. As mentioned above, our achievement of these goals was mixed, thus we recommend a more active and ongoing reflection on the dynamics of power and connection among the stakeholders in a study.

Similarly, the group process discussed in this article illustrated some power dynamics involved in leadership and research. The co-researchers were somewhat hesitant to become the leaders each week because of

an implicit assumption of having a leading researcher. Therefore, educators and practitioners need to purposely address the power differentiation in training and practice. The impact of social practices in counseling arenas was visible in this microcosm as the co-researchers accepted some expectations without challenging the apparent group dynamics.

There are a number of next steps resulting from this study. The group members shared that they would like to experience a longer and more focused group—perhaps working with one question for more time. There were sentiments shared about enhancing the researcher/participant connection and sense of *getting to really know each other* which was somewhat hindered by the structure of the group meetings and journaling format. The immediacy experienced by the group members may have been enhanced by meeting in-person. In addition, future endeavors could explore using specific reflective methods, open dialogue among participants, and even offering a workshop experience.

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**Table 1****Summary of co-researcher/participant characteristics**

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Academic Standing	Religion Spirituality
Anthony	47	Transgender Man	Queer	White	MA Student	Some Western Buddhism/ Various Spiritual Teachings
Dalad	40	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Thai	Doctoral Student	Catholic/Buddhist (Combined)
Erin	43	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	PhD; Visiting University Faculty	Catholic
Kari <sup>a</sup>	28	Cisgender Woman	Queer	White	MA Student	Western Buddhism/ Agnostic Theist
Ryan	31	Gender-Fluid	Bisexual	White	Doctoral Candidate	Buddhist
Yuleinys	U	Cisgender Man (toward Gender-Fluid)	U	Latina	PhD; Counselor Educator	U
Zvi <sup>b</sup>	40	Cisgender Man (toward Gender-Fluid)	Gay	White-Jewish	PhD; Non-Tenure Track Faculty	Jewish flavors with Western Buddhism Infusion/ Interfaith And Agnostic

*Note.* U=Undisclosed.

<sup>a</sup>Program Office of Holistic Research Center/Logistics support

<sup>b</sup>Facilitating Researcher/ Holistic Research Center Director

## Appendix A

### Social Location Paragraphs

Participant	Submitted to Express Interest in the Study
Anthony	I am a forty-seven-year-old, white, able-bodied, college-educated, queer, transgender man who began transition at age 38. I am the youngest of six children from an Italian-Irish Catholic family. I grew up in a middle-class family in a mostly white, suburban area and attended Catholic school from kindergarten through senior year of high school. My father was a doctor and my mother had an associate's degree and worked at home raising six kids. Five out of the six kids in our family attended colleges and hold graduate degrees, including myself. I am able to work and travel on my own freely at this point in my life and transition as I am read as male in most settings. I own a car and rent an apartment by myself.
Dalad	I was originally from Thailand and I am a first-generation of my family who came to the USA. I identify as a cisgender female. I was born in Bangkok, Thailand as the second daughter of a low-income family. My grandparents were from China, but my father was born in Thailand. I grew up in a low-income family community in which there was a strong stereotype toward a female. I came to the USA when I was 17 years old for my Associate Degree. I started to understand diversity as I was living in an urban area. However, due to my background as a female from Thailand, the majority of the time, I have been feeling discriminated against due to misunderstanding perception about a female from my country. Even though I have traveled to many countries, I feel no different relating to how people perceive me as a female from Thailand.
Erin	I am a fourth generation American, Catholic, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender female. I am married and a mother of three children. I grew up in a suburban, upper middle class, nuclear family. My father, grandfather, and all of my uncles served in the United States military. My family had a very service-oriented approach to the community.
Kari	I am a 28-year-old white German, European, French American female living in Oakland, California. I was born in Indiana to a nuclear family with 4 siblings that practiced the German Baptist faith. This religion is in our ancestry for hundreds of years influencing our mentality and ways of being greatly, even after we left when I was 5 years old. At the age of 16, my family and I moved to central Washington State where I completed high school and went to college for Sociology and Spanish. After college, I traveled to Costa Rica where I found a new sense of self and got in touch with my intuition. After getting pregnant in Costa Rica, I returned to the United States and had a baby at the end of 2018. I did an open adoption and he currently resides with that family in Oregon who I visit frequently. I am now attending JFK University in Pleasant Hill for my Master's in Counseling Psychology - Somatics. I present as a female, however, have always had "tomboy" ways of being and recently have become more comfortable in that. I identify as queer and one of my main focuses and identities is my relation to the spiritual world and how that manifests in my physical reality as I experience it through the body.

Participant	Submitted to Express Interest in the Study
Ryan	<p>I am a 31-year-old white doctoral student living in New Mexico. I identify as bisexual and genderfluid. My parents were college professors, and I grew up with a great deal of social class privilege and social capital. I was homeschooled until high school, which shielded me from a great deal of the gender policing I would have likely encountered based on my diverse interests; my maternal grandparents were farmers in Illinois. My relationship with ability status is strongly influenced by my older brother, who is Deaf and has an intellectual disability; I grew up using ASL and identify as bilingual and bicultural. Difficulties in my family system and with my own mental health led to a tumultuous adolescence and my involvement as a patient/client/convict in the mental health, judicial, and carceral systems. These experiences instilled in me a perspective I doubt I would have ever acquired in my sheltered, suburban, and upper-middle-class life. As a young adult, I found contemplative practice through self-help/mutual aid fellowships and personal therapy, and my love of yoga led me to become a yoga teacher. Further, my work as a mental health therapist has exposed me to a number of contemplative practices, which have supported my long-term mental health recovery. I can see how all of my experiences and group memberships influence my current professional agenda (research, practice, teaching, and advocacy).</p>
Yuleinys	<p>I am a cisgender female, Latina immigrant, who resides in central California. I grew up in a comfortable financially stable environment within a diverse community. I am a naturalized American citizen with also a Venezuelan passport. I embrace a bilingual, bicultural lifestyle that involves my children, communication, and traditions. I am still considered able-bodied and I value diverse abilities. I am a counselor educator who enjoys cultures, learning, and diversity.</p>
Zvi	<p>I am a first generation, born in the U.S., Jewish white gay male. I grew up in NY in an upper middle-class family in a part of Brooklyn that has a very suburban feel to it. There was not much diversity around me, and queer people were invisible. My ancestors were survivors of different violent attacks on Jewish communities in Europe. Though I present mostly as male, my gender feels more fluid at times, and I can express myself in ways that are often deemed feminine in Western culture. I am able-bodied, though I can struggle with the media's idea of the perfect male body. I do not fit into that mold. I am well-educated in the academic sense and have had the opportunity to travel abroad and observe life in other countries. At this point, I am leaning towards immersing in other cultures, to the extent possible.</p>



## Appendix B

### Posed Contemplative Questions

Question By	Contemplative Question
Anthony	What would the world be like without gender? What would our life look like individually and collectively if there were no gender? If we did not choose to identify gender in the way that we do, if it was not such a big deal? What would it be like if gender did not exist? We just had our bodies, but did not have gender? So, we have our bodies and this thing called gender, what would we do if we didn't use gender in the ways we use it in this reality? One of his stories - After he started transition, he went to rent a vacuum and he had to check out his gender, and the options were male and female. Why do they need to know my gender to rent a vacuum?
Kari	How do I balance and live with both absolute and relative truths? How do I go back and forth between those 2 extremes? Oneness vs Duality. Balancing Identities in this reality with a lack of identity beyond this
Ryan	In what ways have contemplative and social justice practices interacted in your life?
Erin	As counselors, we are caregivers. What compels you to be a caregiver? Do you view caretaking as a <i>calling/vocation</i> or a just a <i>career</i> ? For the purpose of operationalizing a definition, we will define <i>calling</i> as: (a) 'a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self,' (b) 'to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness,' (c) 'that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation' (Dik et al., 2009, p.6). We will define <i>vocation</i> as consisting of just (b) and (c).
Dalad	Based on my ethnicity/culture: What do I need to remind myself of and put into practice more often? How does this play into my own identity and interaction with others?
Yuleinys	What might you want to learn more about because of being a part of this group?
Zvi	Where do we go from here? What does meaningful integration look like for this process we have been through, given our diverse cultures/identities/COVID-19/personal life twists? What and how are you drawn to reflect more deeply on from what we have explored in a way that can be shared with at least one other person? And how do we hold the desire to share our process in more conventional means (like publishing)?