Exploring the Relationship between Social Marginalization, Meaning in Life, and Mindfulness: A Mixed-Methods Approach¹

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Abstract

This mixed-method study looked at the relationship between marginalization, meaning in life, and mindfulness. Study 1 explored the empirical relationship between three constructs (N = 106). Marginalization correlated negatively with meaning in life and with mindfulness. Meaning in life and mindfulness showed a positive correlation. Mindfulness, in part, explained the relationship between marginalization and meaning in life. This suggests that mindfulness can be a helpful intervention for marginalized people who experience a sense of meaning frustration. In study 2, eight participants with marginalized identities in the U.S. were interviewed to understand how mindfulness has impacted their sense of meaning in life. Three themes are discussed: community, practices, and core teachings. The article concludes with recommendations for mental health practitioners and a discussion of limitations and directions for further research.

Keywords: marginalization, meaning in life, mindfulness, self-compassion, narrative analysis

In U.S. society, people of color and LGBTQ people struggle to connect with a sense of meaning in life (Bailey, Williams, & Favors, 2014; Nadal & Mendoza, 2014), what Frankl (1984) termed meaning frustration. When one’s environment fails to provide access to meaning, or worse, rejects the notion of one’s right to meaning, the person may experience meaning frustration. Wong (2012) expanded on Frankl’s understanding by showing how existential struggle can spark one’s search for meaning. The findings from Bellin’s (2017) study explored the ways in which marginalized people re-experience and retell their life stories, and how this phenomenon helps them shift from a sense of oppression to a sense of liberation. When participants shifted their telling of a story from rejection to acceptance, the retelling helped participants connect to an integrated sense of meaning in life.

Through that study, which investigated how therapy can aid one in the journey of meaning-making, an unexpected theme arose that was not included in the published article. The findings implied the usefulness of mindfulness in helping people to navigate their experiences of marginalization towards meaning in life. More specifically, in the stories participants shared, the author noted a trend whereby mindfulness helped them connect their personal meaning struggles with universal human suffering, enabled them to tolerate distressing emotions that stemmed from marginalization, and supported them to discern when and how they wanted to respond to marginalization. This lends support to Wong (2012), who showed how existential struggle can lead one to search and connect to meaning in life. These cultivated abilities translated into connection with life meaning. Building upon Bellin (2017), the purpose of this study was to empirically capture the relationship between marginalization, meaning in life, and mindfulness,

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and to explore the potential benefits of mindfulness practice for people with marginalized identities, specifically to help them connect with a sense of meaning in life.

We asked the following two quantitative-oriented questions: (1) What is the relation between marginalization and meaning in life? (2) Does mindfulness impact the relation between marginalization and meaning in life? Additionally, we posed the following qualitative-oriented question: (3) How do people of color and/or LGBTQ people (historically marginalized groups in the US) who have a consistent mindfulness practice use their mindfulness skills/states to connect with a sense of meaning in life despite, or in light, of their experiences of being marginalized? Before explaining our mixed-method approach to answering these questions, we will explain the theory behind the three main concepts of the study as we used them throughout our research.

Bridging Social Marginalization, Meaning in Life, and Mindfulness

Marginalization. Social marginalization due to race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation has been shown to have a detrimental impact on both physical and mental health (David, 2014). For example, individuals who belong to historically marginalized groups in the US experience higher rates of suicidality (Peter & Taylor, 2014), stigmatized addiction (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003), and a general sense of powerlessness (Thomas & González-Prendes, 2009).

According to the minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), mental health disparities exist for individuals who belong to historically marginalized groups due to the cumulative impact of long-term day-to-day stress caused by social stigma (Skinta & Curtin, 2016). Minority stress may range from overt acts of violence and harassment to subtle forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions, which are, “unconscious and unintentional expressions of bias and prejudice toward socially devalued groups” (Sue, 2010, p. vii). These stigmatizing experiences can cause emotional dysregulation, which in turn leads to an array of psychopathological outcomes, such as anxiety or substance use (Skinta, 2014). Internalized oppression, where members of the oppressed group unconsciously apply negative stigma of their own identity to themselves, is a particularly harmful manifestation of minority stress, and can have a negative effect on mental and physical wellbeing (Meyer, 2003; Skinta & Curtin, 2016). In this study, we were particularly interested in how the experiences of marginalization impact meaning in life (Bailey et al., 2014; Nadal & Mendoza, 2014).

Meaning in Life. Viktor Frankl (1969), coined the term the “will to meaning,” which he defined as the fundamental human drive to find meaning in life. According to Frankl (1984), meaning in life is the primary motivation for living, and its absence is associated with diminished functioning and quality of life. Meaning in life is founded on a sense of responsibility that one has towards oneself and the world one inhabits (Wong, 2012). It can be experienced through a variety of mediums and expressed in a multitude of creative expressions (Frankl, 1984; Wong 2012).

Another foundational point about meaning in life is that it is a function of human embodiment (Johnson, 2007). Johnson reasoned that meaning is embodied and constructed from the interaction between a person’s body and their environment. In this holistic framework, meaning emerges as we engage with the images, feelings, qualities, and emotions somatically evoked during our encounters with the world.

Park and Folkman’s (1997) meaning-making model also suggests that meaning is ubiquitous, impacting social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Their model highlights two
categories: global meaning, which represents an individual’s general orienting system, and situational meaning, the meaning made in a situational context based on one’s global meaning system. Park and Folkman conceived of a dynamic process whereby we are always appraising situational meaning for its goodness-of-fit to our global meaning. Mostly, situational meaning assimilates easily into global meaning. At times, global meaning must change in order to accommodate situational meaning. Similar to meaning frustration, situational meaning and global meaning can be locked at odds with each other in a state of rumination.

Meaning in life as a psychological construct has since been empirically validated as an important contributor to multiple wellbeing indicators (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger, 2012) including higher quality of life (Krause, 2007) and general health (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009), while being negatively correlated with psychological disorders including depression and anxiety (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009; Steger & Kashdan, 2009). It would reasonably follow that the stress of marginalization, with its internalized impact, could significantly frustrate one’s sense of life meaning.

Steger (2012) defined meaning as, the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. (p. 65)

Steger’s definition incorporates the complexity and conceptual range of meaning in life as a construct, including its immersive and transcendent facets, as well as the cognitive, social, and interpersonal elements.

Bellin (2013) similarly highlighted two key dimensions of meaning in life in order to grasp the full picture of the construct: meaning through doing and meaning through being in the world. Meaning through doing is an action-oriented construct and focuses on future achievement and goal setting (Schulenberg & Melton, 2010), whereas meaning through being involves one’s ever-present sense of dignity and belonging (Bellin, 2017). Therefore, meaning in life is more than what a person achieves in the world, as it is tied to a readily accessible sense of one’s existence mattering.

Meaning frustration. Researchers have found that the experience of social marginalization can have a limiting and negative impact on an individual’s sense of meaning in life (Bailey et al., 2014; Nadal & Mendoza, 2014). While the specific impact of marginalization and meaning in life has room for further exploration, we bring Frankl’s (1984) term of “meaning frustration” to provide a theoretical framework for our study. Frankl understood meaning frustration as the experience of seeking out, but not being able to connect to, one’s meaning in life. Internalized oppression may cause meaning frustration by reducing an individual’s self-esteem, self-worth, or belief in one’s capacity to initiate meaningful change in one’s life (Corrigan, Larson & Rüschi, 2009). Marginalization may also cause individuals to give up on their search for meaning in life after repeatedly being frustrated by their attempted pursuits.

While individuals from historically marginalized groups first experience meaning frustration, they can still access and develop a deep sense of meaning in life, especially when challenges are viewed as personally meaningful (Cotton Bronk, 2014). Indeed, findings from Bellin’s (2017) previous study revealed the ways in which marginalized people re-experience and retell their life stories, which helps them shift from a sense of oppression to a sense of liberation and increase their sense of meaning.
Frankl (1969) highlighted how connecting to a greater sense of meaning can help people bear and transcend any amount of suffering by giving us the psychological resources to persevere (Steger & Kashdan, 2013; Wong, 2014). As Frankl put it, “it is not suffering per se but suffering without meaning that is devastating to the individual” (p. 288). This theory applies to people of color, LGBTQ people, and among others who historically experience social oppression and marginalization, and highlights the importance of connecting to meaning in these communities. In this study, we were interested to see how mindfulness can help marginalized people connect with a sense of meaning in life.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is a vast system of knowledge and practice that spans religion, philosophy, neuroscience, and other fields. In our study, given our collective social-location, we were most influenced by a particular stream of mindfulness that extends from a specific Buddhist tradition. The mindfulness literature available to the West in large part stems from a particular insight-oriented practice, known as Vipassana (Anālayo, 2003). The teachings of Vipassana were brought to the West by a cadre of Western-born teachers who had spent time in Burmese and Thai monasteries, learning with teachers from the Buddhist Theravada tradition (Fronsdal, 2001; Kornfield, 2010). Though there is no single approach to Vipassana mindfulness, there is an underlying theme of paying loving attention to whatever arises in one’s present moment, enabling a clear witnessing of the nature of reality (Yang, 2017). This clear witnessing is likened to waking up and connecting to a sense of real happiness that is not contingent upon changing causes and conditions (Salzberg, 2011). In his interpretation of a primary Theravada text, the Satipatthāna Sutta, Anālayo reviewed the first foundation of mindfulness of the body. In this foundation, the Buddha invited practitioners to investigate the nature of reality, suffering, impermanence, and experience of self, through the experience of our somatic embodiment.

**Mindfulness as focused attention and open monitoring.** Generally, mindfulness includes a variety of practices that involve two distinct elements: focused attention (FA) and open monitoring (OM) (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). FA is when a practitioner of mindfulness chooses a specific object, physical or conceptual, for sustained attention. A common focus or anchor is the breath. In FA anchored on the breath, practitioners focus their attention on their breath coming in and out of their body. When the attention wavers away from the breath, practitioners will return their attention to the breath as soon as they notice that their attention has lapsed. With a more collected attention, practitioners can open their awareness to whatever arises in their sense experience (including thinking) without emotional reactivity. Lutz et al. refer to this widening of attention as open monitoring (OA). Practitioners report a lessening of the sense of a separate self as they witness the ebb and flow of life’s sensations occurring. The potential in OM is to lessen the reactivity that causes suffering.

**Mindfulness and self-compassion.** Previous research has demonstrated a meaningful relationship between the distinct practice of mindfulness and that of self-compassion (Neff, 2003). While mindfulness practices tend to emphasize cultivating attention, self-compassion practices aim specifically to cultivate a sense of loving-kindness towards one’s own experience, and eventually all beings (Fronsdal, 2001; Salzberg, 1995). Self-compassion practices generally include repetition of phrases such as “May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering.” The practitioner intends to embody the phrases while mustering a genuine emotional response to the phrase. The inclusion of heart-centered self-compassion practices
counterbalances the more impersonal nature of mindful observing, especially as transmitted in the Western world (Fronsdal, 2001). Together, mindfulness and compassion yield a loving witness and way of being towards the suffering encountered in the world.

**The importance of mindfulness in community.** Finally, we make brief mention of the importance of community in mindfulness practice. The recognition that mindfulness is not a self-serving endeavor, but a socially connected experience, has recently become a more pronounced teaching in Western Vipassana (Yang, 2017). Considered one of the Three Refuges in Buddhism, spiritual community, or sangha, holds the practice together and keeps the wisdom alive and relevant from one generation to the next. According to Ajahn Chah (2006), the Thai teacher who inspired many of today’s Western-born Vipassana teachers, the community is the site where the morality of the mindfulness tradition is cultivated. The moral roots of mindfulness can be somewhat neglected in the Western pursuit of mindfulness. As explored above, one’s sense of community rejection or acceptance can highly influence their sense of meaning in life, tying together this theme of sangha through the main three concepts of this study. With our main concepts explicated, we turn now to our mixed-method exploration.

**Mixed-Methods Exploration of Social Marginalization, Meaning in Life, and Mindfulness**

In the current research, we began by providing empirical evidence for the relation between social marginalization, meaning in life, and mindfulness. Based on previous anecdotal evidence (Manuel, 2015; Yang, 2017), we expected to find a robust relation between marginalization and decreased meaning in life as well as mindfulness. Next, we expanded on the quantitative findings of Study 1 by providing qualitative evidence of the effect that practicing mindfulness has on meaning in life among members of historically marginalized groups in the US (people of color, LGBTQ). Our research questions were:

1. What is the relation between marginalization and meaning in life?
2. Does mindfulness impact the relation between marginalization and meaning in life?
3. How do people of color and/or LGBTQ people (historically marginalized groups in the US) who have a consistent mindfulness practice use their mindfulness skills/states to connect with a sense of meaning in life despite, or in light, of their experiences of being marginalized?

**Study 1: Exploring the Relation between Marginalization, Meaning in Life, and Mindfulness**

Study 1 tested the association between being a member of a marginalized group, the presence of meaning in life, and being mindful. We expected to find that the constructs would show a significant relationship with each other—namely that marginalization would negatively correlate with meaning in life and mindfulness, and that meaning in life and mindfulness would show a positive correlation. We also hypothesized to find that if a marginalized person experiences lower meaning in life, mindfulness and common humanity can serve to raise meaning in life.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure.** Participants were recruited through outreach to the wider community via listservs, social media, mindfulness organizations, and other social organizations.
Anyone over 18 years old and living in the US was able to take this survey, whether they identified as part of a marginalized group or not, and whether they had a mindfulness practice. As an incentive, the PI donated $1 per participant to the People of Color scholarship fund at Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Based on an a priori power analysis, we determined a minimum sample size of 120 participants to be sufficient (power = .95 at $|r| = .30$; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). In total, 135 participants began the survey study. After excluding incomplete surveys, the final sample was comprised of 106 adults over the age of 18 years. All analyses were conducted using the available data for the measures included in the analysis, and so the sample size varies slightly from analysis to analysis. For our primary analysis, this sample provided 91% power to detect effects assuming the average effect size in social and personality psychology, and a 5% Type I error rate.

Following are a series of tables that show the diversity in our sample in regard to gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and age.

Table 1. **Demographic breakdown by gender identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transman</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2 Participants wrote in “Pansexual,” “Trans-attracted man”)

Table 2. **Demographic breakdown by sexual orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1.9 Participants wrote in “non binary,” “Two-Spirit”)

Table 3. **Demographic breakdown by race/ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black/African Descent</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Latina/Latinx</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(6.6 Participants wrote in “Jewish,” “European/white,” “Native American/White”)

Biracial/Multiethnic                           | 4.7                    |
Far East Asian                                 | 2.8                    |
South Asian/Indian                             | 2.8                    |
Southeast Asian/Filipino                       | 1.9                    |
Native American/First Nation                   | 0.9                    |
Middle Eastern                                 | 0.9                    |
In addition to race/ethnicity and sexual orientation/gender identity, participants identified with other historically marginalized identifiers, including women, identifying with a specific religion (Jewish, Muslim, or Catholic), overweight, and disabled. 87.7% of participants identified with at least one historically marginalized group in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-65</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mindfulness demographics.** When asked about years practicing in general, (on and off, rather than consistently), participants responded with an average of 4.02 years (SD = 1.62). In terms of years consistently practicing mindfulness, the mean was 2.92 years (SD = 1.69). When asked about hours of formal practice per week, participants averaged 4.01 hours (SD = 5.71). The following Table 5 provides data for mindfulness community membership:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regular Community Participant</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True in the past, but no longer</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants were directed to the online survey. Demographic questions were completed before measures of marginalization, meaning in life, and mindfulness. At the conclusion of the survey, we ended with a reflection on affirmation (Please list one characteristic/quality that you value about yourself. For example: courageous, grounded, inspiring to others, etc. In 2 or 3 sentences please share why you chose the above characteristic/quality.) and provided national resources for social support and networking.

**Measures**

**Marginalization.** Two separate measures were used to capture different aspects of the subjective experience of marginalization. First, to assess the self-perceptions of social rank and relative social standing, the Social Comparison Scale (SCS; Allan & Gilbert, 1995) was used. We used the SCS because the authors constructed the scale with items that are, “concerned with attractiveness, and items concerned with feeling different and being an outsider” (p. 298). Their factor analysis confirmed that the SCS measures one sense of group fit, which fits in well with our theoretical understanding of marginalization. The SCS uses a semantic differential methodology—each item asks participants to make a general comparison of themselves in relation to other people by rating themselves along a 10-point bipolar scale (e.g., In relationship to others I feel: Incompetent - More competent). Low scores point to feelings of inferiority and
general low rank self-perceptions. For brevity, we included three of the 11 items that were relevant to our hypotheses: (1) Left out - Accepted, (2) Different - Same, and, (3) An outsider - An insider; further, we were interested in capturing the dynamics of power in marginalization and added (4) Powerless - Powerful to the scale (\(\alpha = .85, M = 5.69, SD = 1.87\)). Additionally, we considered negative public regard as an important aspect of marginalization. To assess negative public regard, participants completed the 8-item Other as Shamer Scale (OSS; Matos, Pinto-Gouveia, Gilbert, Duarte, & Figueiredo, 2015). Participants indicated how frequently they experience negative public regard (e.g., “I feel other people see me as not quite good enough”) using 5-point scales (0 = Never to 4 = Almost Always) (\(\alpha = .86, M = 2.01, SD = .74\)).

**Meaning in Life.** Meaning in life was assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The MLQ is composed of two separate, though negatively correlated, five-item subscales that assess the search for meaning (e.g., “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful”) and the presence of meaning (e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning”). Items are rated on a 5-point scale anchored at *not at all true* to *very true*. Though we included both subscales, the search for meaning subscale did not correlate with other constructs in a meaningful way. This might have been a function of low power, discussed further in the limitations section. We will only report on data concerning the presence of meaning subscale since we are concerned with experiencing meaning. (\(\alpha_{\text{presence}} = .90, M_{\text{presence}} = 3.91, SD_{\text{presence}} = .87\)).

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness was measured using the Five Facets of Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFM; Williams, Dalgleish, Karl, & Kuyken, 2014), and one subscale from the Self-Compassion Scale, Common Humanity (CH). Both scales are scored on a 5-point Likert scale anchored at *not at all true* to *very true*. For the FFM, we only used the highest loaded item for each subscale, thereby shortening the questionnaire to 5 questions: (1) I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them. (Nonreactivity to Inner Experience subscale); (2) I pay attention to (physical/bodily) sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face. (pain/pleasure) (Observing subscale); (3) I find myself doing things without paying attention. (Acting with Awareness subscale); (4) I think some of my emotions are bad or inappropriate and I shouldn’t feel them. (Nonjudging of Inner Experience subscale); and (5) I have trouble thinking of the right words to express how I feel about things. (Describing subscale). Sample size considerations prevented us from examining each facet of mindfulness independently in our primary analyses, so the 5 items were averaged together to form an index of mindfulness where higher values indicate a person was more mindful (\(\alpha = .68, M = 3.53, SD = .71\)). Given previous research on marginalized populations (Bellin, 2017), we were most interested in the aspect of self-compassion related to perceiving one’s suffering as part of the human experience. This aspect is captured by the Common Humanity subscale of the Self-Compassion Scale: (1) When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through; (2) When I’m down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am; (3) When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people; (4) I try to see my failings as part of the human condition (\(\alpha = .89, M = 3.37, SD = 1.10\)).
Results

What is the relationship between marginalization and finding meaning in life? Correlations between our variables of interest are presented in Table 6. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between meaning in life and both FFM ($r = .55$, $p < .001$) and CH ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Looking at marginalization as negative public regard (OSS), we see negative correlations with both of the mindfulness measures, FFM ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$), and CH ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$). OSS also correlates negatively with meaning in life ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). The SCS only correlated weakly with CH ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$). Because of the absence of correlation between SCS and the other scales, we did not include the SCS in further exploration. CH and FFM are related but separate constructs ($r = .50$, $p < .001$).

Table 6. Intercorrelations between marginalization scales, mindfulness scales, and presence of meaning subscale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Marginalized Identities (SCS)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Negative Public Regard (OSS)</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mindfulness (FFM)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Common Humanity (CH)</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Presence of Meaning</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Correlational evidence suggested that the strongest predictors of presence of meaning in life were negative public regard, mindfulness, and common humanity. Subsequently, we tested a model in which the relation between negative public regard and presence of meaning in life was mediated by perceived mindfulness (FFM) and common humanity (CH) by examining the overall significance of the indirect effect (i.e., the path through the mediators) using Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS SPSS macro with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstraps. Bootstrapping is a non-parametric resampling procedure that is used for testing mediation and provides greater statistical power and precision than Baron and Kenny’s (1986) steps in testing mediation (e.g., MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Shest, 2002; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). If zero falls outside the confidence interval, the indirect effect is deemed significant and mediation can be said to be present. As predicted, perceived mindfulness (FFM) partially mediated the relation between negative public regard and presence of meaning in life $\beta_{\text{indirect}} = -0.17$, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.07]. In contrast, common humanity was not as significant a mediator $\beta_{\text{indirect}} = -0.06$, 95% CI [-0.19, 0.00]. The direct effect of negative public regard on presence of meaning remained significant $\beta_{\text{direct}} = -0.25$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [-0.48, -0.02], suggesting (perhaps unsurprisingly) that the relation between negative public regard and presence of meaning in life is not fully explained by idiosyncratic differences in mindfulness.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 demonstrate that marginalization (in the form of negative public regard) can significantly reduce the understanding that one’s life has meaning, in part, because these negative experiences decrease mindfulness. It is surprising that perceiving one’s suffering as part of the human experience, common humanity, did not show a similar effect. A larger sample size would provide more statistical power to examine this effect. Still, these results suggest that one
strategy for countering the negative impact of marginalization on meaning in life is to adopt a mindfulness practice. Indeed, there are numerous memoirs of socially marginalized practitioners who found meaning in life through mindfulness (e.g., Manuel, 2015; Yang, 2017). In the next study, we expand on how mindfulness can support meaning in life among marginalized people.

**Study 2: Revealing and Honoring the Stories of Marginalization, Mindfulness, and Meaning in Life**

**Participants**

Aiming for saturation, the researchers interviewed 8 participants. Participants were adults between the ages of 26-72 who identify as being marginalized in normative US society because of a core identifier (race/ethnicity and/or sexual orientation/gender identity). All the participants were living near the Bay Area, California at the time of the interview. Additionally, participants had a consistent mindfulness practice that had been continuous for at least 2 years, engaging in intentional mindfulness practice at least 3 times a week. The following Table 7 summarizes pertinent participant demographics.

Table 7. Demographics of 8 participants interviewed for our study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marginalized Identifier(s)</th>
<th>Self-Reported Race</th>
<th>Self-Reported Sexuality/Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Queer/Genderqueer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cricket</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Race/Class/Person of Color</td>
<td>Hispanic (Latina)</td>
<td>Straight/Cisgender Female</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Procedure

Our qualitative-oriented research question was: How do people of color and/or LGBTQ people (historically marginalized groups in the US) who have a consistent mindfulness practice use their mindfulness skills/states to connect with a sense of meaning in life despite, or in light, of their experiences of being marginalized? (“Consistent” for this study is 2 years of practicing 3 times per week. An example of skills is concentration practice, and an example of state is having a concentrated mind.) We used a semi-structured interview with 8 participants and were informed by grounded theory and narrative analysis for this study’s analysis. Both are discussed in further detail below.

Before the semi-structured interview, participants were offered a short form to read that explained informed consent. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by members of the research team. Using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the narratives were coded for emergent themes. A password protected cloud-based program, Dedoose (http://www.dedoose.com/), was used to organize the data, codes, and emerging themes.

Participants were asked questions to establish criteria for inclusion. Due to the personal nature of the study, we offered the referrals for local low-fee counseling services. Upon successful meeting of the criteria, a follow-up interview was held in person. The main semi-structured interview consisted of the following questions:

1. What parts of your identity do you consider to be marginalized by society at large?
2. Please describe your mindfulness practice. How/why did you start practicing? How do you understand mindfulness? Do you have a mindfulness community?
3. Can you share a story where you encountered your marginalized identity/ies during your formal mindfulness practice? (For example, felt emotions around being marginalized, confronted by a memory of being marginalized, etc.) How did that encounter impact your sense of belonging, coherence, or connection with purpose in life?
   3a. How did you use your mindfulness skills/state to meet the experience shared above? (An example of skills is concentration practice, and an example of state is having a concentrated mind.)
4. Can you share a story when mindfulness helped you cope with the negative impact of marginalization in your life? What helped you to successfully navigate the challenges that are exemplified in the story you just shared?
5. Can you share a story when mindfulness helped you feel a sense of belonging, coherence, or connection with purpose in life? What pieces of mindfulness practice were most supportive to you?
6. How might mindfulness around marginalization (personally and in society at large) influence your sense of belonging, coherence, and/or search for purpose in life?
7. How has mindfulness changed your perspective of your experience of marginalization? The experience of others?
8. What other questions are important to ask you in order to understand how mindfulness has helped you successfully connect to a sense of belonging, coherence, or connection with purpose in life?

After the data was transcribed and analyzed, we crafted an individualized summary letter for each participant that touched on the key themes that we gathered from that participant’s interview. We shared the letter with that participant and allowed them to offer any feedback or reflections.
Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, we divided the analytical process amongst the three members of the qualitative research team. We read the transcriptions while playing back the recording of the interviews to reconnect with the text. Using narrative analysis as our guide, we read the transcriptions, carefully taking into “consideration the entire story and focuse[d] on its content” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 15).

In narrative analysis, the process for coding the narratives is dependent on the interpretation and theoretical context of the reader. We were guided by our research questions and theoretical framework, as described above in the introduction. We focused on stories that exemplified how different aspects of mindfulness practice related to the participants’ sense of meaning, especially as it related to their marginalized identity/ies. We used a cloud-based software (dedoose.com) to store the transcripts, analysis memos, and to keep track of the coding process. We employed the constant comparison method associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to organize the narratives into 143 codes. We then consolidated the codes into three themes, presented below.

Assuring Quality

In order to increase quality, we used the research team as a small group to discuss research coding and theme building throughout the process. Having multiple readers allowed for various interpretations about the texts and added to the transparency of the study. As mentioned above, each participant was given a summary letter that contained key themes from their interview. We further consulted the authenticity criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1994) and the quality guidelines put out by the National Institutes of Health (2001), and the National Centre for Social Research in the United Kingdom (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003).

Note on the qualitative research team. For the sake of transparency, it is important to share that this research team was formed through the Holistic Research Center at John F. Kennedy in the Bay Area, California. Our team consists of one Assistant Professor in the Holistic Counseling Psychology department (Jewish European-descent American male), one recent alumnus (Jewish Middle-Eastern descent, British female), and one current student (European-descent, American female). All three of us identify within the Queer spectrum, and all practice and have studied mindfulness. We are also all trained and experienced to varying degrees as mental health clinicians.

We want to acknowledge our sociocultural and educational position in being able to choose which facets of mindfulness (that have been transmuted from Eastern culture to Western culture) to include in this paper. Separating mindfulness from its spiritual lineage in order to investigate empirical constructs can pose a problem of colonization. We have done our best to honor the home of this topic, though our exploration is no doubt a cultural interpretation based on our Western bias.

Findings

Below, we discuss the three themes that were crafted from the Grounded Theory/Narrative Research analysis of the transcripts. The themes are People, Practices, and Philosophies. In the People theme, we discuss aspects of participants’ experience in their mindfulness communities.
In Practices, we discuss specific mindfulness techniques and tools that were highlighted by participants. In Philosophies, we explore the common teachings that participants shared. Each theme offers an important look at an aspect of mindfulness that marginalized individuals employed and/or encountered that helped them connect to a sense of meaning in life.

**People.** This theme will investigate the interactions between participants and practitioners in their mindfulness communities. More specifically, it will explore how participants’ sense of safety impacted their experience of marginalization, ability to utilize mindfulness tools, and meaning making in the present moment. Porges’ (2004) Polyvagal theory demonstrates the importance of a safe community in cultivating the social engagement system. A sense of safety allows for autonomic nervous system regulation, an ability to connect and engage with others in the present moment, and therefore the capacity to integrate and make meaning in the here and now (Johnson, 2007). Safe, inclusive, communities that welcome all parts of people can help develop resiliency by increasing the state one’s body can stay in before it recruits defensive strategies, also referred to as the window of tolerance or range of autonomic state (Porges, 2011). In the following excerpt, Kelly, who uses they/them pronouns, discussed their physiological response to the experience of danger and invisibility, as their non-binary gender identity was dismissed by a practitioner in their mindfulness community:

> I feel totally invisible right now. And it was this visceral, surge through my body, of like, oh my god, I don’t belong here, and wanting to say something but then not wanting to because I was so triggered. It was this really intense like physical, emotional rush through the body… I mean there was such a sense of panic. It was a really crowded day in the hall, like I was in the middle and there was no way out. So, there was this sense of wanting to escape but not being able to.

Kelly’s adaptive neurophysiological response demonstrated a diminished state in which they were successfully defending against an immobilizing environmental threat (“surge through my body…”). Their ability to stay with and sense into their somatic activation in a self-compassionate and non-grasping way, exhibits how mindfulness communities can offer the felt sense of belonging that is a foundation for one’s sense of meaning (Johnson, 2007).

We can understand Kelly’s experience as a microinvalidation, a form of microaggression in which communications, “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups” (Sue, 2010, p. 37). The affective consequences include, but are not limited to, a feeling of confusion, rejection, shame, not belonging, discomfort, helplessness, invalidation, anger, and being misunderstood. This particular form of microaggression may be especially harmful due to its tendency to subtly deny the reality of the other’s experiences. Another participant’s (Cricket) encounter with a practitioner demonstrates the emotional pain that often accompanies the experience of a microinvalidation.

> He describes his relationship with this practitioner: “I just remember trying to talk to this one teacher who I have a good relationship with and just he really trying hard to bridge… to make me feel comfortable. He was so awkward, and it was so painful. The assumptions and questions that he asked, I mean it was kind of like going to this great doctor, but this doctor doesn’t have a clue of what’s going on with you. That heterosexual lens is so dominant that unless they have some contact with a gay person, they have no [idea]… I don’t think he really thought about it at all. And I just remember feeling kind of like that all of the time in those meetings. If I ever said anything, I just felt super vulnerable in the beginning. Just because of the isolation.” His words bring to light one example of his mindfulness community mirroring
rejection (Bellin, 2017), and thus potentially blocking his ability to make meaning. Cricket’s marginalized parts were not reflected back to him by his practitioner, and this seemed to contribute to his sense of separateness and painful vulnerability. Johnson (2007) suggests that the body is the gateway to making meaning of our experience. We imagine that Cricket’s ability to make meaning through, foremost, a perceived bodily safety, is being challenged by his sense of invisibility in his community.

In contrast to the impact of an underrepresentation of identity in community, some participants reported their mindfulness communities mirroring acceptance, which contributed to a sense of belonging and safety. Bob described his experience of transcending limiting beliefs through the acceptance of his community:

My experience at the residential retreat was kind of eye-opening because I didn’t realize I had so many negative voices in my head. And I can’t tell you exactly what they said, just in general it was a sense of not being worthy. And so, one of the things that came out of being in the two sitting groups is they’ve done practices that sort of help you come to terms with those voices and whatever else may be in your past. There was a practice we did called “Shadow Work” where we were supposed to make peace with our shadow side and one of the ways we did that was they had this thing called, “The Tunnel of Love.” It was basically two lines of people and you would walk blindfolded down the line and people would say affirming things to you, things that they felt you might need to hear. And that was really an emotional experience because I think without consciousness we don’t make room for that and we’re not used to hearing those voices, they are so counter to the voices we hear in our heads, taking up residence and causing us distress. But I remember that, specifically as being an affirming experience.

Bob’s narration directs us to the conclusion that an accepting community cultivates safety cues which activate the social engagement system and therefore allow for an ability to connect to and receive love from others. Yang (2017) so eloquently described the experience of internalizing a safe community in the following quote,

As practice expands from the personal to the collective, from the internal to the external, from the particular to the universal, it comes to embody the value of inclusion of all things, of all people and of all differences. All of our experiences are invited and belong; none of us is marginalized or excluded. In that way, we are being invited to create beautiful and Beloved Communities. (p. 79)

These qualitative patterns imply that somatic safety which comes from a supportive mindfulness community could help promote the effective use of mindfulness practices, which will be discussed in the next section.

**Practices.** This theme will explore the practices used to cultivate mindfulness and their impact on participants’ experiences of marginalization and connection to meaning in life. We identified three core types of mindfulness practices: focused attention, open monitoring, and loving-kindness/compassion.

**Focused attention.** This practice is a type of concentration meditation. Attention can be directed on an internal object, such as the breath or bodily sensation, or on an external object, such as a sound or image (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Most participants in our study had a regular routine of focused attention practice. For example, Cricket spoke about sitting every day for approximately 45 minutes. In describing his experience, Cricket said, “I liked sitting for longer periods of time,
because I liked, you know, how you feel when you get concentrated. I like the calmness and stillness that can happen when you start sitting. Basically, you become quite altered.” Focused sitting practice offered Cricket an opportunity to connect to his somatic experience, which resulted in an aware and calm mind. Cricket later remarked how he believed this regular practice was necessary as it prevented him from developing mental health issues, such as depression. As mentioned in the previous theme, our bodily senses form the basis of the meaning which makes and shapes the perception of our experience (Johnson, 2007). It can be surmised that practices that deepen somatic awareness contribute to one’s sense of meaning in life. Additionally, contact with the self, such as on a somatic or emotional level, has been linked to increased feelings that life has meaning (Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995).

Focused attention also served as a coping mechanism when participants experienced strong emotions. For example, Bob shared, “When I feel stress or anxiety I tell myself, ‘you need to stop for a minute and take three deep cleansing breaths and just let everything go and then come back to the moment and ask what is it I need to do now instead of being scattered.’” Bob’s practice of focusing on and slowing down his breath helped him alter his distressed physiological and emotional experience. Mindfulness tools that bring collected attention to direct somatic experience can shape how practitioners experience and make meaning.

Open monitoring. This practice involves bringing an open awareness to a wide array of internal or external objects (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013). For example, a person may practice open monitoring by noting the various emotions and thoughts arising moment to moment.

Bob discussed his practice of witnessing his thoughts during formal sitting practice at a residential retreat. “When we’re silent, it all comes up and you hear the voices say whatever they say. I think for me it was, ‘I’m not good enough,’ for whatever reason. ‘I’m not good enough because I’m gay, I’m not good enough because I’m black.’” Bob’s open monitoring meditation practice was an eye-opening experience for him as he was able to notice the unconscious stream of negative self-talk around his marginalized identities. Bob further shared, “It took two and a half days though, and being in silence for me to adjust to all the background noise in my head, and then after the two and half days I began to question or make peace with the voices, but it was the beginning of the process. I sort of got used to them being there, and what they would tell us is things would come up, feelings would come up, thoughts would come, and they will go away. Try not to hold onto them, just note it.” For Bob, formal meditation practice and the retreat setting helped him train his attention and quieten the internal and external distractions so that he could hear the constant negative stream of voices in his mind. Following this first step of developing awareness, Bob was able to choose how to consciously address these negative voices. For marginalized individuals, open monitoring can offer more distance and perspective on their thoughts and feelings, which alters the meaning they make of their experience (Germer et al., 2013). Following Park and Folkman’s (1997) meaning-making framework, open monitoring practice can offer marginalized individuals an opportunity to question and revise their unhealthy and harmful global meaning framework, i.e. negative beliefs about the world and themselves.

Several participants also spoke about how they used open monitoring in their informal day-to-day practice, such as by paying attention to feelings and thoughts as they arise. Informal practice of open monitoring can help individuals, “cultivate equanimity in the midst of random and unexpected life events” (Germer et al., 2013, p. 18). This mindfulness skill was highlighted as a useful tool when dealing with marginalizing experiences. For example, Kim shared,
Like last night going to a yoga class at a prestigious gym and they’re all white people, I’m the only one who is not, and I’m thinking in my mind that I’m not supposed to be in this room, I’m not supposed to be doing this practice of yoga even though people are saying “namaste’” and using my language. There’s still something off. But tapping into, “I do belong here,” and being able to recognize that pattern of thinking rather than getting caught up in it and preventing me from doing the things I want to do.

Kim’s practice of informal open monitoring allowed her to notice her negative core beliefs and then consciously shift her global meaning (self-concept) from the belief that she does not belong because she is not white, to the belief that she does belong. The change in her global meaning in turn shifted her situational meaning (the interpretation of events) and allowed her to feel welcome at the gym. This is another example of how mindfulness practice can alter one’s sense of meaning despite the negative core beliefs internalized as a result of one’s marginalized identities.

Additionally, Kim highlighted how this practice of observing her thoughts and feelings gave her more control, as she noted, “being able to catch when it’s becoming a cycle, and being able to stop it and say enough, that’s not needed.” Mindfulness helped Kim gain more agency in the situation as she was able to control her mind’s chatter and choose how to refocus her attention, rather than running on autopilot. According to Frankl (1969; 1984) this ability to choose, even in acts as small as the focus of one’s attention, is an essential component of meaning in life.

**Loving-kindness/compassion.** These practices are designed to foster sensitivity to the suffering of the self and others, as well as the cultivation of goodwill to all beings (Kolts, 2016). These practices are said to emotionally warm up the experience of meditation by focusing on tender, caring, and soothing qualities, which can be particularly helpful in making meaning out of emotional difficulty (Germer et al., 2013).

Tara shared how she practices self-compassion. “I have a big victim identity narrative from my internalized belief system, so instead of seeing myself as a terrible little thing, there is a sense of a precious thing that is suffering and is scared, that does not feel empowered.” Compassion practice enabled Tara to direct love and support to herself. Self-compassion practices can connect practitioners to a sense of meaning through being, i.e. that they have value and that their life matters (Bellin, 2017). Additionally, the presence of self-compassion has been associated with promoting meaning in life (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013).

Tara further shared how this practice enabled her to see the universality of her suffering. “If I interact with it in myself, get familiar with texture, flavor, and repetitive nature, I become more sensitive to it and recognize it is happening all around me. It has really opened up my heart in terms of empathy and compassion. It makes me feel we are all in this together.” By being more sensitive to her own suffering, Tara was also able to feel a greater sense of connection to, and belonging with, other people, as well as compassion for their suffering. The cultivation of compassion is connected with meaning in life as it may engender a sense purpose and responsibility to alleviate the suffering of others (Frankl, 1984). This sense of interconnection and belonging that arises through compassion practices can also help individuals overcome their feelings of separation and isolation due to their marginalized identities and is associated with enhanced perception of meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2013). Tara’s description also demonstrates the sensuality of meaning-making (Johnson, 2007), as mindfulness enables her to connect to the felt-sense of belonging through her body.
Compassion and loving-kindness practice also helped participants become open to receiving love and compassion from others. For example, Kelly shared, “part of my practice is to let in love and support and to feel it, and not have the body and the mind tense against letting in care.” Kelly brought up a story about a time they shared their feelings relating to their marginalized gender and sexual-orientation identity in a meditation group they attend. Kelly shared, “after that group, I connected with the teacher that was leading that group and just felt this moment of compassion from her… There was no literal agenda or sense of self. It was just this pure embodiment of compassion that I was able to meet and receive in a way that I’m not usually able to, especially from someone that doesn’t identify the way that I do.” Kelly practiced letting in love, not only by being vulnerable, but by then receiving the compassion from their teacher and other practitioners. Though Kelly’s marginalized experienced made it difficult for them to receive compassion from others who are different for fear of misunderstanding, their practice helped them take in love and meaningfully connect to others. This skill appeared to transform their relationship to themselves and others. This demonstrates how compassion practice may connect the marginalized individuals to a sense of meaning as it allows them to transcend the limitations of their own self and identity and to feel part of a larger entity (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). Below, we will discuss how participants encountered these practices through specific teachings and philosophies.

**Philosophies.** This theme will explore the philosophical points that underlie the interviews, focusing on the mindfulness teachings that helped participants connect with a sense of meaning in life as they struggled with their experience of marginalization. All of the participants that were interviewed had been heavily influenced by a particular stream of insight-oriented Buddhism, known as Vipassana (Anālayo, 2003). As mentioned above, there is no one single approach to Vipassana. There is, though, an underlying theme of paying loving attention to whatever arises in one’s present moment enabling a clear witnessing of the nature of reality (Salzberg, 2011; Yang, 2017). A common outcome described in mindfulness teachings is that with practice comes a sense of interconnectedness with humanity and with all life.

**Interconnectedness.** Cricket shared the following, “we’re really just moments of consciousness that are arising and passing and just this idea of interconnection on some levels doesn’t make sense to me, but I’ll have these moments when this separation I feel, kind of like this hard separation, isn’t that hard, and I can feel super connected to the world.” In this quotation, Cricket explained how the teaching of interconnection and his experience of interconnection through practice has helped to soften the harshness of the marginalization he experiences in his life as a gay man. He expressed that he does not always understand the idea of interconnection, but somehow the teaching of interconnection has made it possible for him to periodically feel a sense of connection to the world. From an expanded understanding of meaning in life, as we laid out above, we connect this sense of interconnection with the foundational elements of belonging and being affirmation that are crucial to one’s sense of meaning in life. Cricket’s quotation also introduces another key point in our philosophy theme, the recognition of a caring inner witness, or third-person observer.

**Caring observer.** Bob reflected on his mindfulness retreat experiences that, “the most important thing [the teachers] tried to enlighten us with was the third person observer, which is where you pretend you’re not you but someone observing you, and that is how I got to a place of allowing

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the feelings to ebb and flow and not holding onto them, which became more of a formative practice that bit of knowledge of stepping out of yourself to watch yourself.” Bob’s internalization of teachings about a third person observer allowed him to watch the impermanent and ever-changing flow of feelings, thoughts, and sensations. From a philosophical standpoint, Bob was witnessing how the ingredients of what makes up a sense of solid separate self are actually quite dynamic and are not at all steadfast, as they are always ebbing and flowing (Anālayo, 2003). The malleability of the sense of a separate self is important to sustained meaning in life, because meaning in life is also a dynamic process rather than a set template (Bellin, 2015). Thus, we surmise that Bob’s sense of meaning in life shifts from a socially marginalized self to an ever-present flow of experience which transcends and includes his personal life narrative. Ultimately, this leads one to, as Bob expressed later in his interview, “hold yourself with compassion.” Compassion is a final philosophical component that appeared in multiple interviews.

**Compassion.** On the facet of compassion as it connects to meaning in life, Tara shared,

> I am inspired by Buddhist philosophy, and the bodhisattva path, where you are committed to end the suffering for all beings. We are all in this together, struggling and doing our best. I am not separate. It feels so much better to have that. When feelings of [competition] or that I am an outsider come up, I identify with it for less time, and recognize that there is some larger truth… Not only do I have mindfulness practice, but I feel blessed with the Buddhist teachings, and teachings like… the Divine Mother, more compassion teachings. I can sit in these really uncomfortable places and huge amounts of love come up. From that, there is a lot of tenderness and support.

Tara’s quotations summed up this theme on philosophical teachings that helped participants connect to meaning in life in the face of marginalization. She shared about how compassion teachings of the bodhisattva path and the Divine Mother inspired a cycle of witnessing the discomfort within herself and others with a third person observer quality, which cultivated a sense of interconnectivity and compassion. The presence of compassion for herself, and for all beings, allowed her to sit lovingly with more suffering. This ability seemed to wake up a larger sense of purpose to care for the suffering that she encounters from marginalization.

**Discussion (Study 2)**

The qualitative part of our investigation addressed the following question: How do people of color and/or LGBTQ people (historically marginalized groups in the US) who have a consistent mindfulness practice use their mindfulness skills/states to connect with a sense of meaning in life despite, or in light, of their experiences of being marginalized? The presentation of our themes above demonstrated how despite the negative impact of marginalization on social identity, mindfulness community, practices, and teachings can facilitate a sense of meaning in life. Below, we reintegrate our findings with our theoretical framework, exploring Park and Folkman’s (1997) model of meaning appraisal, Wong’s (2012) existential meaning model, the sensuality of meaning-making through mindfulness of the body (Johnson, 2007), and the function of community to help us wake up to a higher sense of purpose (Yang, 2017).
Mindfulness Impact on Situational and Global Meaning

Our participants talked about how they felt limited and trapped by their experience of marginalization, and the accompanying isolation, emotional pain, and lack of a sense of belonging. Park and Folkman’s (1997) model helped us make sense of their experiences by looking through a meaning-making lens. Their model distinguished global meaning (the beliefs, goals, and feelings related to self, other, and the universe) from situational meaning (the meaning that we assign to specific experiences based on the global meaning framework). Our findings suggest that the situational meaning that people ascribe to their marginalized identities can be impacted by mindfulness communities, practices, and philosophies. The stories we heard shared many mindfulness-related moments of situational meaning challenging global meaning. The constant situational meaning appraisal within the conditions of community mirroring acceptance, practices of loving attention, and teachings connected to waking up, seem to have enabled a reinterpretation of once rejected identities. By immersing in mindfulness, marginalized people can shift their global meaning, which may include the negative beliefs about their identities, without minimizing the pain or struggle of their journeys. Our findings also find confluence with Wong’s (2012) existential positive psychology meaning model, as we heard from participants how their struggle from marginalization sparked their search and ultimate connection with meaning in life.

Meaning and the Body

Our participants’ experiences displayed a relationship between meaning-making and the first foundation of mindfulness, the body (Anālayo, 2003). Their accounts suggest, as Johnson (2007) proposed, that meaning is made through the sensuality of experience. The way we somatically experience ourselves and our environments impacts the ways that we appraise the meaning of those interactions. Gently bringing our attention to sensations and emotions in the body as they arise and pass away, and directing loving-kindness to our experience of the body are foundations of mindfulness (Fronsdal, 2001). Our participants used these mindfulness practices, often within the container of community, to connect to their bodily experience, which became the bedrock from which their meaning was made in the moment.

This emergent pattern from our qualitative inquiry also invites a deeper investigation into the potential role of the body in healing the marginalized experience. Manuel (2015), also maintaining that meaning is made through our body, suggested that through mindfulness practice, we may come to experience our somatic embodiment as both conditional and boundless. She offered the idea that wisdom is not enough to heal the wounds of the marginalized. Microaggressions, outright aggressions, and internalized shame represent deep somatic wounds that are too often held in the bodies of those who are socially marginalized. Our findings propose that creating a mindful and meaningful relationship with the body in the context of community, practice, and philosophy may be an important element in both healing emotional and physiological wounds.

Identity in Community

We observed in participants’ personal narratives that bringing mindful awareness to their internal and external experience in the context of a “safe-enough” community impacted the way that they experienced their marginalized identities. Yang (2017) discussed the necessity of acknowledging
cultural differences in cultivating the experience of being “safe-enough” in community. The word “safe-enough” is used to acknowledge that most social spaces are not totally safe for people who identify as marginalized. He described the conditions of a community and their impact on one’s ability to experience their body as open and receptive to healing. He wrote, Spiritual explorations require intimacy and tenderness, and it is very hard to relax into what is an open, vulnerable state when our defenses already have to be in place to protect from the injuries and traumas caused by unconsciousness and patterns embedded in the dominant culture. (Yang, 2017, p. 68)

His sentiment reminds us that having a “safe-enough” space, a community container to hold all of our experiences, especially those experiences that land outside of the dominant cultural narrative, is fundamental in creating trust to deactivate our defenses and open us up to collective healing.

When participants were able to witness the ebb and flow of their experience within an accepting and inclusive community, they were able to feel liberated, to some extent, from a sense of rejection. Their stories supported the idea that community acceptance and compassion allow for self-acceptance and self-compassion. One common form of transcendence was through a larger sense of collective purpose and meaning that still held their marginalization with compassion.

**General Discussion and Conclusion**

Our mixed-methods approach explored in depth the relationship between marginalization, meaning in life, and mindfulness. We conclude with a summary of our combined findings with mental health practitioners in mind. In brief, we found that meaning in life and mindfulness/common humanity are connected, and that marginalization (as experienced by negative public regard) also shows a significant relationship with mindfulness/common humanity. While mindfulness can lead to an expanded sense of meaning and purpose, meaning in life can provide a strong existential foundation for mindful and compassionate witnessing of one’s life. Our data also showed that the relationship between marginalization and meaning in life, can be explained, in part, by mindfulness (though not common humanity). We conclude from this that mindfulness can be helpful for people who experience marginalization, to a certain degree, by helping them connect with a sense of meaning in life.

In the US today, mindfulness can be found with greater frequency in many different settings, including the psychotherapy office. Our qualitative study serves as a reminder that for mindfulness to have an impact in assisting marginalized people connect to meaning in life, therapists have to consider the communities, practices, and foundational philosophies from which mindfulness is gleaned. Each piece is important to the mindfulness puzzle.

Mindfulness as a cultivator of life meaning is best practiced among a supportive community that knows how to be proactive about diversity and inclusion. Yang’s (2017) book, *Awakening Together*, is an excellent guide to consider diversity in community. Mindfulness of the body can be an important focus to help a practitioner establish intimacy with their somatic-sensual experience of themselves and the world. We add a note of reminder here about the trauma that is often stored in the body; thus, mindful exploration of the body should be done with care and compassion.

If therapists do assert themselves in positions of offering mindfulness in a clinical setting, we recommend referring clients to supportive mindfulness communities (online or in-person),
deeply engaging in mindfulness/self-compassion practices themselves, and taking up some foundational study of core cultural teachings from which mindfulness has emerged.

**Limitations and Next Steps**

The major limitation of our study was the low sample size. Potentially, and as a direction for future research, with an increased sample size we could have obtained enough power to be certain about our results when it came to the subscale of common humanity. Greater power will allow for the investigation of which facets of mindfulness are most helpful. Indeed, a future study can look at the Self-Compassion Scale as a whole and other possible contributing factors, such as social support and personality.

We also are aware that mindfulness, even within Buddhism alone, varies greatly between different cultures and schools of thought. Thus, future research might include interviews of practitioners from a variety of mindfulness communities, including perhaps different religions that have contemplative practices that similarly cultivate mindfulness. We attempted to honor the richness of the traditions from which mindfulness grows out of, though we are ever aware that we are making cultural interpretations that might misguide from the original intention of the people that grew these teachings and practices.

As a final thematic next step, we were intrigued by the connection between body and community that emerged in this study as a foundation of meaning in life. Future research might investigate the impact on meaning in life by marginalization from a socio-somatic experience. Furthermore, researchers can explore the empirical relationship and thematic underpinnings of the body making-meaning through loving and mindful attention in the face of sustained adversity.

**References**


