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Mindful of authority: A snapshot of the meditation and contemplative practices of some Canadian Commissioned Police Officers

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ABSTRACT

Research into the benefits of mindfulness training, meditation, and other contemplative practices for the workplace has grown dramatically. Within the context of Canadian policing, the wellness benefits of these mental practices are beginning to be understood. However, little is known about Canadian police officers' current use of these practices. This information is important for future research exploring the effects of these practices over time, and for police agencies considering introducing mindfulness or meditation training programs into their organizations. This article shares initial findings from a broader, yet unpublished, qualitative study of a cohort of Commissioned Officers from a large Canadian police service who self-identified as having regular meditation practices. Invitations to participate in a study exploring the perceived influence of meditation on leadership were e-mailed to all 605 Commissioned Officers. Of the 13 individuals who responded, 11 met the study criteria. Qualitative content analysis of the data yielded the following results: Commissioned Officers in a wide variety of roles in this police service are engaged in a broad spectrum of contemplative practices; each participant engaged in multiple practices; and the most common reason for beginning to practice meditation was to assist in recovery from a psychological or physical injury. These findings suggest that police organizations introduce a variety of mental training practices early in officers' service to ensure their career is more positive, resilient, and rewarding.

Key Words Mindfulness meditation in policing; contemplative practice; reasons for beginning meditation; Canadian police officer wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the potential benefits of mindfulness, meditation, and other forms of contemplative practice for the workplace has grown exponentially in the last decade (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Good et al., 2016; Shahbaz & Parker, 2021). In Canada, where calls have been made to do more to understand and support the mental wellness of first responders (Carleton et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Krakauer et al., 2020; Rinkoff, 2022; Tam-Seto, 2022), the benefits of meditation and mindfulness training for enhancing the well-being of police officers is beginning to be understood (Stevenson, 2022). However, little is known about Canadian police officers' current use of meditation and other related contemplative practices.

This information is important for at least two reasons. First, establishing an initial understanding of the varieties of meditation currently used by some Canadian police personnel is needed for any future research that explores changes in the use of these mental practices over time. Second, if police organizations intend to effectively introduce mindfulness and meditation training programs into their own agencies it would be valuable to understand why some police officers begin to practice meditation.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to this baseline of understanding by sharing preliminary findings from a larger exploratory qualitative leadership study of Commissioned Officers in a large Canadian police service who self-identified as having regular meditation practices. For clarity, Commissioned Officers are comprised of the six most senior ranks in the police agency, from Inspector to the head of the police service.

While the broader, yet unpublished, study explores perceptions of how meditation might influence the practice of leadership in this police agency, this report provides an early

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snapshot of the study's participants, the varieties of meditation and contemplative practices they employ, and the reasons they began to meditate. We begin by providing the conceptualizations of mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative practice that were used to guide this study, as well as a brief background on some of the primary research involving mindfulness-based interventions within the context of policing.

Study Definitions of Mindfulness, Meditation, and Contemplative Practices

As is the case with the terms "leadership," "management," and "organizational culture," there are multiple definitions of the terms "mindfulness," "meditation," and "contemplative practice." To this end, researchers have argued that the lack of clarity around mindfulness definitions is problematic, leading to ubiquitous usage and potential misinformation around the topic (van Dam et al., 2018). While an analysis of these multiple definitions is beyond the scope of this article, for clarity, the following conceptualizations of mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative practice informed this study.

Mindfulness has been defined as a state of consciousness characterized by "an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). It is understood that everyone possesses a basic ability to be mindful, and that mindfulness as both a mental state and an enduring dispositional trait can be enhanced by regularly engaging in mindfulness training such as meditation and related contemplative practices (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017).

Meditation as defined by Walsh and Shapiro (2006) is frequently used in psychological research and guided this study. They propose that meditation is "a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration" (pp. 228–229).

Contemplative practice is often characterized more broadly than meditation practice. In this study, we drew upon Edwards et al.'s (2017) understanding of contemplative practice as "any activity undertaken regularly with the intention of quieting the mind and developing deep concentration, calm, and awareness of the present moment" (p. 1).

Finally, with respect to what constitutes a regular meditation practice, the definition from a study exploring the influence of meditation practice on the leadership development of managers was adopted (Frizzel et al., 2017). These researchers defined regular meditation practice as training at least three times per week, for at least 3 months. In this article, the terms mindfulness practice and meditation practice are used interchangeably. As will be outlined in the methods sections, these definitions were specifically used by the researcher to aid in the selection of study participants and to categorize the various practices and reasons given for beginning a meditation practice.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions and Policing Research

A valuable research method for exploring the outcomes of mindfulness and meditation practice is to exawmine any changes that may occur in individuals following a defined mindfulness-based training program or intervention (MBI). The first established mindfulness-based intervention program was mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), created by Kabat-Zin et al. (1985) for the treatment of chronic pain. This 8-week group training program includes meditation, gentle yoga, sensory awareness, and psychoeducation training and has been considered the gold standard for MBI research (Bartlett et al., 2019).

MBSR and other variant MBIs appear to be effective in enhancing the health and well-being of participants as diverse as teachers, nurses, bio-tech employees, and service centre employees (Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017). Beyond individual professions, MBIs are also extensively used in the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies, demonstrating similar results, while the authors caution that further research is still necessary (Bartlett et al., 2019; Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Urrila, 2022).

Interest in MBIs in the context of Canadian policing has recently begun to grow (Stevenson, 2022). In the United States, initial pilot and feasibility studies using mindfulness-based resiliency training (MBRT) reported benefits for high-risk professionals, including police, particularly related to reduced aggression, burnout, and sleep disturbance, and increased dispositional mindfulness, resilience, and emotional regulation (Bergman et al., 2016; Christopher et al., 2016; 2018; Eddy et al., 2021; Kaplan et al., 2017).

More recently, international research on MBIs within the context of high-risk professions has advanced to include several randomized controlled trials (RCTs). In Brazil, Trombka et al. (2018) are examining the outcomes of mindfulness-based health promotion (MBHP) training with active Brazilian police officers (n=160), exploring the differences in burnout and quality-of-life measures between program participants and a waitlist control group.

In Australia, Joyce et al. (2019) examined the wellness outcomes of Australian fire and hazardous material workers who participated in the Resilience@Work [RAW] Mindfulness Program. Comparing co-workers who did not participate in the online program with those who did, the intervention group scored higher on measures of adaptive resilience over time.

In the United Kingdom, Fitzhugh et al. (2019) contrasted well-being outcomes of police professionals who used the online MBIs Headspace and Mindfit Cop against those of a waitlist control group. Measures related to well-being, life satisfaction, resilience, and performance showed improvement for the MBI participants over the waitlisted group.

Finally, in the United States, Grupe et al. (2021) conducted an RCT involving police officers (n=114) from three Midwestern U.S. agencies that examined changes in psychological and biological measures after a modified MBRT intervention. Combining the measurement of psychometric instruments and distress-related biomarkers, researchers found greater improvements in mental health symptoms and sleep quality, as well as a lower cortisol awakening response among the MBI participants than in the waitlist control group.

Although this study is not based on intervention methodology, this evidence suggests mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative practices are important areas of exploration within the context of police professional well-being.

METHODS

On March 18, 2021, following formal institutional approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board

and the police service's Human Resources Research Board, an "Invitation to Participate" was sent to all 605 Commissioned Officers via their work e-mail fan out list. After reviewing the study details and informed consent information, e-mail recipients were instructed to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating in a telephone screening interview, followed by confidentially discussing their meditation and leadership practices in a semi-structured interview and focus group.

Screening Interviews and Participant Selection

Inclusion criteria for the study included holding the rank of a Commissioned Officer, having a regular meditation practice (Frizzel et al., 2017), and being willing to participate in an individual interview and follow-up focus group. When individuals contacted the researcher, a date and time to conduct a brief initial telephone screening was established. During these confidential screening interviews, the researcher read from a script which repeated the study details, informed consent information, and confirmed the respondents' willingness to continue.

Screening included a series of questions related to the participant's demographics and meditation practices. These scripted questions included: "How long have you practiced meditation?"; "What types of meditation do you practice?"; and "How often do you practice meditation each week?" Respondents who met the inclusion criteria were invited to take part in an online recorded semi-structured interview with the researcher.

It is important to note that, prior to beginning the screening interviews, one respondent e-mailed the researcher asking for additional information. She asked whether her regular practice of yoga fit this study's definition of a mindfulness practice. In response, she was provided with the study's definitions of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and meditation (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006) and was invited to continue with a screening interview. None of the other respondents asked for additional clarity or information, nor were they provided with the study's definitions in advance. This was done intentionally to capture the respondents' unique understandings of what they believe constitutes meditation practice, without any prior suggestions from the researcher.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Interviews

Participants were e-mailed copies of the potential interview questions in advance, and all interviews were conducted using the Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform. During each interview, the specific prompt related to their meditation practice was simply "Tell me about your practice of meditation." If participants had difficulty answering this request, follow-up prompts included: "When did you begin meditation and why?"; "What type(s) of meditation do you practice?"; "How did you learn meditation?"; and "How often do you practice meditation and for how long?"

Each interview was later transcribed and reviewed by the researcher. Participants received a copy of their transcript and were asked to contact the researcher if they felt any corrections were required. Two participants suggested minor changes, including correcting the abbreviations of educational programs and specialized police units, and correcting dates for specific events in their careers. These changes were made by the researcher.

After the interview stage, participants were invited to join an online follow-up focus group interview at a later date to discuss the full study's preliminary findings. This final data collection phase was undertaken to determine whether any additional data could be gleaned collectively from the participants. A total of three focus groups were hosted, which included eight of the eleven study participants.

Participants

Of the 605 Commissioned Officers who were sent an invitation, 13 individuals contacted the researcher and asked to participate. After preliminary screening phone calls, two individuals did not meet the basic study inclusion criteria. One of these individuals had received a copy of the invitation from a Commissioned Officer but was not yet at that rank, while a second initial respondent did not meet the study definition of regular meditation practice (Frizzel et al., 2017). Accordingly, the final number of study participants was 11 for a response rate of approximately 2% of the total population of Commissioned Officers. A descriptive summary of the demographics of the study participants follows.

Demographics of Study Participants (n=11)

The age range of the participants was 45 to 57 years, with a mean age of 49.6 years. Participants self-identified their gender as either male (6) or female (5). Race or ethnicity were reported as White (8), Metis (1), South Asian (1) and Black (1).

Length of service in the police agency varied between 19 and 30 years, with a mean of 24.5 years. Participants reported they had been in formal leadership roles (defined as their first promotion in rank) between 10 and 21 years, with a mean of 15.5 years. The ranks of participants were almost exclusively Inspectors (10), with one Superintendent.

Finally, participants were serving in a wide variety of roles including: Unit Commander (2), District Commander (2), Operational Support (2), Major Crimes Section (1), Workplace Health and Wellness (1), Integrated Proceeds of Crime Unit (1), Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (1), and Executive Officer to a senior executive (1).

Data Analysis Methods

Data was analyzed using conventional qualitative content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, information gathered during the screening interviews and semi-structured interviews concerning the types of meditation practiced and reasons for beginning meditation were analyzed and organized by the researcher into codes, categories, and frequencies. Preliminary findings are presented below.

RESULTS

Varieties of Meditation Practiced

A broad spectrum of contemplative practices was identified, with each study participant engaging in at least two different types of practice. The most commonly cited categories of practices were breath awareness exercises (8) and yoga classes (8). The use of trademarked technology or app-based meditations such as Headspace, Oura Ring, or Insight Meditation were also frequently reported (5). Several participants (4) reported using a mantra (either sound or word) during their meditation practice, while the same number reported engaging in positive visualization practices (4).

Additional practices mentioned by at least two participants included gratitude practice, martial arts practice, gardening, nature walking, dog walking and using meta-cognitive processing techniques to gain awareness of problematic thought patterns. Finally, practices described by one participant included listening to music, long distance running, and religious prayer (see Table I).

Reasons for Beginning Meditation Practice

Much like the varieties of practice, participants' reasons for originally starting to meditate were varied, and often more than one reason was given. These responses were organized into categories. The most frequent explanation was that participants were introduced to meditation while receiving treatment for an operational stress injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other work-related psychological trauma (5). Several officers indicated they were introduced to meditation during a yoga class (4). Recovering from a physical injury was also identified as a reason for starting a meditation practice (2).

Less common reasons provided included learning meditation through martial arts (2), being encouraged by a partner or spouse to try it (2), and simply hearing about meditation and wanting to formally give it a try (2). Starting meditation as part of a religious upbringing was mentioned by one participant.

DISCUSSION

Responses

With respect to the response rate, analysis of a recent U.S. online national study (n=1861) suggested that 23% of the public engaged in some type of contemplative practice (Lekhak et al., 2022). With this statistic in mind, the response rate of approximately 2 % of all Commissioned Officers was very low. Potential limitations to this study that may have influenced willingness to participate include: a request from a researcher outside of the police service; a single recruitment e-mail; and a research design that required far greater engagement than simply anonymously completing an online survey.

TABLE I Varieties of meditation and contemplative practices employed by study participants (n=11)

Category of Practice	Number of Participants
Breath Awareness	8
Yoga Classes	8
App or Technology	5
Mantra (Sound or Word)	4
Visualization	4
Gratitude	2
Martial Arts	2
Gardening	2
Dog Walking	2
Meta-Cognitive Processing	2
Listening to Music	1
Long-Distance Running	1
Religious Prayer	1

Accordingly, due to the low response rate and the nature of qualitative research (Hays & McKibben, 2021), these results cannot be generalized beyond the 11 participants who contacted the researcher to discuss their meditation practices. Based on previously described findings by Lekhak et al. (2022) that 23% of the public engage in some type of contemplative practice, we can broadly speculate that among the Commissioned Officers who did not reply, there may be others who engage in some type of contemplative practice. A recommendation for future research is to disseminate an anonymous online survey inquiring about mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative practices to all Commissioned Officers in order to better understand prevalence and interest.

However, based on those who did participate, Commissioned Officers working in a variety of operational and administrative assignments indicated they practice meditation. The representation of five women (45.4%) in this study was higher than the overall gender distribution of approximately 25% women within the police service. Although participants were predominantly White, the voices of individuals from other racial backgrounds were heard in the study. The remaining demographics relating to age, years of police service, and years of formal leadership experience were consistent with those in the Commissioned Officers ranks.

Varieties of Practice

The participants' understanding of what constitutes meditation was another interesting result of the study. The wide variety of responses provided, such as dog walking, gardening, martial arts, running, and prayer, indicates that many of the participants interpret meditation practice broadly. Although meditation in this study was defined as self-regulation training that brings mental processes under greater voluntary control (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), contemplative practice, as more broadly defined by Edwards et al. (2017), could be a more accurate description of how the Commissioned Officers who participated in this study understood meditation.

The finding that each participant did more than one type of practice was also interesting. Using the analogy of physical exercise, just as individuals may do a variety of exercises to stay physically well (i.e., cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training), each of these participants did a variety of practices to stay mentally well (i.e., breathing, gratitude, and yoga). Accordingly, a suggestion from these results is that police organizations offer their employees a wide variety of contemplative practices when introducing mindfulness or meditation training programs.

Reasons for Beginning a Meditation Practice

What led these participants to start meditating was also varied, with respondents often providing several reasons. However, the finding that most study participants reported being introduced to meditation while recovering from psychological or physical injury is a significant finding concerning the wellness of police officers. Continuing with the exercise analogy, this is akin to starting to exercise only after experiencing a significant injury or disease.

Fortunately, information on the preventive benefits of meditation and mindfulness for police well-being is gaining

traction in Canada (Stevenson, 2022). With this in mind, another suggestion from the results of this study is that police organizations incorporate these training programs early in an employee's service. This proactive introduction may go a long way in ensuring officers enjoy a long, resilient, and rewarding career.

CONCLUSION

This article provided a snapshot of the use of mindfulness meditation and related contemplative practices by some Commissioned Officers in a large Canadian police organization in March 2021. Although based on a small number of participants, and therefore not generalizable to all Commissioned Officers in the police service, it is valuable information regarding the characteristics of some Canadian Commissioned Officers who practice meditation, how they practice, and why they began. In addition to assisting future police wellness researchers, this information could be useful for police agencies to consider when proactively introducing mindfulness or meditation training programs into their organizations. Unlike the experiences of many of this study's participants, it is hoped this introduction takes place long before a diagnosis of mental or physical injury occurs.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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