

Running Head: INTEGRATIVE CONNECTION IN PARTNER YOGA FOR COUPLES

INTEGRATIVE CONNECTION, A DISCOVERY: INTERPRETATIVE  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF COUPLE EXPERIENCES IN A  
TRADITIONAL PARTNER YOGA PRACTICE

Reesa Packard

Doctoral thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Doctorate of Philosophy degree in Counselling & Spirituality  
Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON

2019

© Reesa Packard, Ottawa, Canada, 2020

# INTEGRATIVE CONNECTION IN PARTNER YOGA FOR COUPLES

LIST OF FIGURES.....	5
LIST OF TABLES.....	6
ABSTRACT.....	7
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	8
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	10
Purpose of the Study.....	10
Statement of the Problem.....	10
Holism and Integration of Body-based Approaches in Psychology.....	10
Emerging Body-based Approaches to Couple Theory and Practice.....	11
Partner Yoga for Couples.....	11
Significance of the Research.....	13
Overview of Thesis.....	17
Research Questions.....	17
CHAPTER TWO: EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
Overview of Research on Partner Yoga for Couples .....	18
Overview of Research on Mindfulness for Couples.....	23
Summary and Conclusions of Empirical Literature Review.....	34
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	35
Attachment Theory.....	35
Interpersonal Neurobiology.....	38
Transpersonal Development Theory.....	47
Summary and Conclusions of Theoretical Frameworks.....	51
Definition of Terms.....	54

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY.....	56
Participants.....	56
Procedure.....	58
Ethics and Protection of Human Rights.....	66
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS.....	68
Part One: Overview of Participant Responses.....	68
Part Two: Partner as A Novel Connection Experience.....	78
Part Three: Partner Yoga as an Experience of Attachment, Couple Functioning, Self-Expansiveness, and Spirituality.....	87
Part Four: Meaning of the Partner Yoga Practice for Couples.....	100
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION.....	104
Review and Interpretation of Findings.....	104
Clinical Applications for Couple Psychotherapy.....	114
Limitations of the Study.....	114
Strengths of the Study.....	117
Implications for Future Research.....	120
Conclusion.....	122
REFERENCES.....	125
APPENDICES.....	134
A. Ethics Certificate (REB).....	134
B. Participant Recruitment Poster.....	135
C. Informed Consent Form.....	136
D. Participant Sociodemographic Questionnaire.....	138

E. Partner Yoga for Couples Workshop Format.....139

F. IPA Research Interview Protocol.....140

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Relationship between the theoretical frameworks .....52

Figure 3.2 Relationship between the theoretical frameworks and integration.....53

Figure 3.3 The Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting.....54

Figure 5.1 Sequence of experiences in attachment within partner yoga.....91

Figure 6.1 Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting, shown with  
identified elements of experience.....114

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Relevant Constructs Across the Theoretical Frameworks.....55

Table 5.1 Themes and sub-themes in couples' novel connection experiences.....79

Table 5.2 Summary of experiences of couple functioning in partner yoga.....93

Table 5.3 Emerging themes in understandings of partner yoga for couples.....102

## ABSTRACT

This research fills a gap in the literature by seeking to understand through couples' own perspectives their experiences in, and meanings made of, a traditional Sivananda partner yoga practice. Eleven couples followed a series of four, three-hour Partner Yoga for Couples workshops. Each couple had an in-depth interview with the researcher to explore their experiences. Participant expressions were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, interpreted through attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and transpersonal development frameworks. It was found that all participant couples reported having a novel connection experience unlike anything they had experienced before. This novel connection experience appeared to occur when (1) couples *engaged actively* together, (2) in a *body-based* manner integrating different aspects of self, that (3) required them to *interdependently collaborate*, creating together what neither could alone. The term *Integrative Connection* is proposed, to capture this novel connection phenomenon. A trans-theoretical *Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting* is also proposed, to explain the couples' arrival at this integrative connection, through their potent relational experiences within the partner yoga for couples practice.

*Keywords: integrative connection, connection, couple connection, holism, integrative, couple, yoga, partner yoga, mindfulness, mindfulness for couples, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), personal development, relational development, integrative development, attachment, intersubjectivity, transpersonal development, interpersonal neurobiology*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey has taken me through immense professional, personal, and spiritual development. Never could I have imaged where this developmental process would lead, in terms of my own understandings and experiences of integrative connection and relational potency. There is a sense of intersubjective co-creation of process and reality with every human whose path has crossed with mine, through the sharing of ideas and other connection experiences across the past several years. To every one of my fellow journeyers in each the Sivananda yoga, Saint Paul University, CFIR, and general psychotherapy communities, I thank you.

I remember clearly the crisp but sunny fall day in 2011 when I appeared, unannounced, in Dr. Judith Malette's office, wondering tentatively and with reverence about the Master of Counselling and Spirituality program. I was received with a strikingly genuine enthusiasm and recognition that planted 'seeds' which, even so many years later, still continue to ripen... Those moments have led me directly here. Similarly, Dr. Martin Rovers and I have paths that just have just kept intertwining. We have worked together in countless capacities over the years, and with each experience, I have found myself learning more than I could have ever anticipated, being left increasingly better-positioned for my next steps. Dr. David Joubert has a perceptive knack for cutting straight through to the essence of everything, which, coupled with his unwavering support, has effectively challenged and stretched me throughout the years. And Dr. Stephanie Wiebe, coming aboard this project in its very final stages, still made an invaluable impact through her support and guidance, rendering the project far better than it could have been without her. I thank you all for your contributions, not only to this

project, but also to me, and my internal world where I continue to hold you.

I count myself very lucky to share many potent, mutually enriching connections. My first family has believed in me and loved me, and held me to a standard that has motivated my achievements, now serving as inner compass pushing me always forward. My in-law family has been an unwavering beacon of emotional and instrumental support, and tenderness and love, adding meaning to the strivings. My friend family has inspired and loved and mirrored me, accepting me always and immersing ever more fully with me in some of the most potent connection I have come to know, giving me sustenance as I moved this project forward. And my own precious family, co-created with my best friend and hero, is my favourite instantiation of Integrative Connection. Life and love have a different meaning here. François, you have touched me and shaped this work, all so deeply at the very core. The admiration and adoration that I have always felt for you continues to at once propel me forward and hold me securely in place, wherever any of that should find us. And finally, Odin, my love, Mama's work is inspired by and dedicated to you. Your little toddler self loves more deeply and truly, and wisely, than I ever thought possible. You, and loving you, have taught me everything about connection that I have come to live and hold as true.

If this project is a meaningful contribution, then that is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants who have upheld me, while I attempted to uphold it. The works and intellects of great thinkers like Smuts, Bertalanffy, Porges, Siegel, and Wilbur have filled me with awe and inspiration. It was a great privilege to immerse in these realities, and an honour to do my part in sharing them. OM DUM DURGAYEI NAMAHA

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Integrative Connection, A Discovery: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Couple Experiences in a Traditional Partner Yoga Practice

##### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to identify couple experiences in a partner yoga practice and to explore meanings of these experiences. The findings of this research are understood as initial contributions to an understanding of partner yoga for couples and its significance as a lived experience.

##### **Statement of the Problem**

##### **Holism and Integration of Body-Based Approaches in Psychology**

Interpersonal neurobiology is a relatively new psychology topic in which there is currently much research and clinical focus (Cozolino, 2006; Fishbane, 2013; Siegel, 2007; 2009; 2012; Porges, 2011). Whereas some psychological perspectives may focus on cognitive and/or emotional realities, this field of interpersonal neurobiology incorporates a body-based perspective. Transpersonal development theory (Wilbur, 1996), while not new like interpersonal neurobiology, does similarly offer an expanded, holistic view of the person, and a spiritual perspective. In its synthesizing of numerous developmental perspectives across psychology, spirituality, and religion, it integrates aspects of the person into a cohesive, dynamic whole. Both interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal development theory have attachment theory as part of their underlying theoretical frameworks. With ongoing expansion of the theory of attachment it, too, has grown to take on an increasingly holistic nature, addressing various aspects of the person.

According to Jan Cristaan Smuts (2010/1927), father of the philosophy of holism, the more parts of the human system considered and integrated together, the more thorough the understanding of the human being. This stance suggests that integrating the body, spirituality, and other parts of the person into psychological theory and research would have the potential to build a better understanding of that whole. By extension, it could also be said that in studying couples more holistically (Smuts, 2010/1927), a more complete understanding could be achieved not only of each partner, but also of the couple, as a whole (human) system (see Bertalanffy 1973; Bowen, 1978).

### **Emerging Body-based Approaches to Couple Theory and Practice**

Indeed, increasingly holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) perspectives are being developed in the study of the couple as well as in the study of the individual. A prime example is the psychobiological approach to couple therapy (PACT) (Solomon & Tatkin, 2011), which integrates cognitive and emotional aspects of the couple system with a holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927), body-based approach (see Solomon & Tatkin, 2011). PACT is offering more complete understandings of human experience through its expanded, holistic focus. PACT is also contributing more holistic understandings of couple relationships in recognizing two whole human experiences joining together to co-create a whole couple experience. In their dealings with these whole, complex human systems (Smuts, 2010/1927), body-based approaches, such as PACT, have made important strides toward a more comprehensive understanding of individuals and couples.

### **Partner Yoga for Couples in Empirical Research**

Partner yoga for couples has received little attention in empirical research thus far. Very few studies have investigated partner yoga (i.e.: Milbury, et. al., 2015; Swart, 2011;

Bohy, 2010; Carson, et. al., 2004; Chou, 2004), and fewer still have investigated partner yoga specifically for couples (i.e.: Swart, 2011; Bohy, 2010; Carson, et. al., 2004; Chou, 2004). The common focus of this existing partner yoga research is on caregiving dyads, which are not necessarily also romantic couples.

No known studies have directly investigated the lived experiences of partner yoga practitioners, whether couples or other partners, nor has the practice been investigated from a phenomenological perspective. There does exist a sizable body of research on yoga as an individual practice (see, for example, yoga for depression: Cramer et. al., 2013; yoga for mental and physical health: Bussing et. al., 2012; yoga for stress and inflammation: Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2011; yoga for treatment of psychiatric disorders: Cabral, Meyer & Ames, 2011), and also a body of research on mindfulness for couples (thoroughly treated in literature review below). Even as these pockets of research on similar topics have developed, possibilities for investigations into partner yoga for couples appear to remain overlooked.

In sum, fields of study similar to partner yoga for couples have contributed findings considered as important and relevant. Some such fields of study are: yoga for individuals, mindfulness for couples, and partner yoga for non-couple caregiving dyads. This research has not yet been extended to partner yoga specifically for couples. Little research has focused on investigating partner yoga as a lived experience, in any population. This appears to be a significant gap in the literature, and there would be a corresponding need to phenomenologically investigate partner yoga practice experiences in couples.

Attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and transpersonal development could be

frameworks through which to begin exploring partner yoga for couples. These theories share the holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927), body-based focus of partner yoga. Each is relationally-based, and transpersonal development theory is also spiritually-based. Each has been drawn upon by research in mindfulness for couples, a similar field of study.

For what might be the first time, a solid context could be said to exist for the empirical study of partner yoga for couples. This is due to aforementioned developments in the holistic and body-based theories coinciding with developments in surrounding empirical research. No known research to-date has integrated the attachment-based perspectives of transpersonal development and interpersonal neurobiology. There is also no known research that has employed these theoretical frameworks to approach holistic understandings of individual experiencing and couple connection. Furthermore, no known research has investigated couple experiences of a body-based, spiritual, and relationally-oriented practice such as partner yoga, from these perspectives.

### **Significance of the Research**

The present research was an initial empirical foray into the subject of partner yoga for couples, with the potential to make significant contributions. Because partner yoga for couples had not been well-investigated, a major contribution of this study was to elucidate what partner yoga for couples is and how it is experienced by couples. Other implications pertinent to couple therapy and research were expected, including: understanding how body-based experiences can be important to couples and couple connecting, the place for holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) conceptualizations of the couple and its partners, and further integrating the body-based and also spiritual aspects of experiences into understandings of the couple unit. In its contributing basic

understandings of a specific yoga experience, this research was also seen as supporting the integration of Eastern contemplative wisdom with Western psychological epistemology.

The holism (Smuts, 2010/1927) of this project is among its major underlying themes, strengths, and contributions. It was built upon the foundation of an expanded view of the person, and of the couple, incorporating bodily experiences into more conventional ways of examining. It also welcomed the topic of spirituality as another under-researched aspect of the whole person and whole couple experience.

**Historical and philosophical contexts for IPA.** Philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed the origins of methodological phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Husserl's student and assistant, encouraged ideological and practical shifts in this early phenomenology until a new branch of phenomenology was born (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). With these shifts, the classical aim of suspending of all presupposition was challenged (Reiners, 2012). Prior to the shift, suspending of presuppositions was seen as necessary so as not to taint the purity of the object's *lifeworld* (subjective lived experience) with *a priori* knowledge (Reiners, 2012).

The new phenomenological era ushered in by Heidegger held the idea of researcher as *subject* rather than as *object*—a person in their own lifeworld too, for whom suspending the presuppositions would mean suspending the actual self—an impossibility (Reiners, 2012). Phenomenological methods began to allow the researcher to interact with the data rather than being restricted to collecting, witnessing, and directly rendering this data forth (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology of this present research is aligned with

Hiedeggerian (rather than Husserlian) philosophies. These Hiedeggerian philosophies are hermeneutically (as opposed to reflectively) based, and incite interpretation (further to description) (see Reiners, 2012 for a detailed delineation of the two phenomenology branches).

**Goodness of fit of IPA for the present research.** A point of intersection is noted between the philosophies underlying IPA and partner yoga. Phenomenological methodology seeks to extract the essence of a phenomenon through convergences in participants' reported experiences (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016, Englander, 2012; Larkin, & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2012; Reiners, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Biggerstaff, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005; Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985). Partner yoga is based in Advaita Vedanta philosophy (Sivananda, 1941/1999), and views the person as fundamentally interconnected with all others, and within a divine essence. This unity, or interconnection, is consistent with the phenomenological perspective in IPA, described above. Both see individuals as living their subjective reality, within an ultimate truth representing a broader reality, through fundamental interconnectedness with others.

Wertz (2005) has illustrated the IPA researcher's approach toward participants and their experiences, described as "an attitude of wonder that is highly empathetic". It is said that the researcher "empathically joins with participants", even "coperforms" ('co-performs') these experiences and "savours the situations described in a slow, meditative way". This researcher's approach is to fully 'take in' the participant and their experiences in a way that "attends to, even magnifies, all the details" (Wertz, 2005). This deep, connected attending to 'other' lends itself to the impression that IPA is especially

well-suited to the study of partner yoga. This approach, which is predicated on deeply involved dyadic process, might be useful in also approaching encounters of other deeply involved dyadic processes. A process of ‘embracing’ the whole person within their subjective reality appears common to both partner yoga and phenomenological perspectives. Both IPA and partner yoga appear to share intersubjective, developmental, and holistic philosophical orientations.

These observations are similar to discussions by other authors, considering phenomenology to be an ideal research method for the broad categories of health care (e.g.: Biggerstaff, 2008; Creswell, 2007) or human science and psychological research (e.g.: Englander, 2012; Reiners, 2012; Larkin, & Thompson, 2012; Wertz, 2005; Giorgi, 1985). Phenomenological researchers seek to use the subject-subject reality (and not the subject-object reality) to get at *the phenomenon itself*, through the subjective truths of participants (Englander, 2012; Creswell, 2007). The approach, therefore, appears to be especially well-suited to disciplines such as psychology which are concerned with the lived reality of the complex person from a more holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) perspective, and also as in partner yoga (Englander, 2012; Biggerstaff, 2008).

Insofar as phenomenology seeks to unveil the essence of the phenomenon through its experience and meaning for the participants, it can be seen as especially well-suited to basic research in topic areas that are emergent, as-yet under-developed, and perhaps unclear (Englander, 2012; Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2012; Reiners, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Biggerstaff, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005; Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985). The topic area of partner yoga for couples, given the current state of the field of empirical research, appears to fit these descriptions well.

In employing this IPA methodology, the research investigated subjective lived experiences of partner yoga for couples from the participants' own perspectives and within their own meaning frameworks. This allowed for the development of in-depth understandings about how the partner yoga for couples practice was experienced by, and meaningful for, the participants.

### **Overview of thesis**

Eleven couples voluntarily partook in a series of partner yoga workshops and then engaged in an in-depth interview with the researcher to explore their experiences. The yoga program given to participant couples, Sivananda Yoga, is part of a lineage of traditional yoga philosophy and practice extending back to the sacred texts of Hinduism (i.e.: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and Bhagavad Gita in the Vedic texts). The study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis as its method for the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Given the limited research studying partner yoga for couples, interpretative frameworks for the data analysis were also informed by research on similar constructs. The theories of attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and transpersonal development served as overarching theoretical frameworks.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were based on the existing literature and served to orient the study procedure:

- (1) What were the couples' overall experiences of partner yoga and what meaning was made of these experiences?
- (2) Did the couples experience attachment, couple functioning, transpersonal development, and spirituality within partner yoga, and if so, how were these experienced?
- (3) What can therefore be understood of the partner yoga phenomenon as it occurs within the couple context, including what it is and what it can mean for couples?

## CHAPTER TWO

## EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

**Overview of Research on Partner Yoga for Couples**

The literature addressing partner yoga is limited, and research on partner yoga specifically for couples is even more so. There are only two known partner yoga for couples programs: (1) the Couple-Based Tibetan Yoga Program for lung cancer patients and their caregivers (Milbury, et. al., 2015), and (2) the Mindfulness-Based Relationship-Enhancement program (Carson, et. al, 2004). Other relevant research with different but related points of focus included three specific contributions: (1) a theoretical article asserting that partner yoga for couples is a transpersonal psychotherapy practice (Swart, 2011), (2) an unpublished thesis dissertation with a small study on the effects of *breathwork* upon couples (Chou, 2004), (3) an extensive qualitative analysis study conducted with individuals, measuring relational impacts of their individual yoga practices (Ross, et. al., 2014). There also exists a more sizable pocket of research on mindfulness for couples, with several sub-categories. Each of these sections of the literature, along with their findings, are elaborated upon below.

**Couple-based Tibetan yoga program for lung cancer patients and their caregivers.** The study investigated partner yoga using caregiving couplets, some of which were couples. This work by Milbury et. al. (2015) enlisted ten cancer-patient / caregiver couplets to follow a 15-course Tibetan Partner Yoga program spanning five weeks. Multiple sessions per week covered the teaching and practicing of: (1) deep breathing awareness and visualization techniques, (2) breath-retention exercises, (3) mindfulness practice through focused attention and guided meditation, (4) Lsa Lung

movements resembling chair yoga postures and incorporating self-massage, and (5) brief compassion-based meditation (Milbury et. al., 2015). The study concluded that this program is a viable intervention for cancer patients and their caregivers including couplets dealing with advanced disease. The patients experienced a 20% reduction in fatigue and in sleep disturbances and a 30% reduction in depressive symptoms. Their caregivers experienced a 30% and 20% reduction in each category, accordingly. The majority of participants (92%) rated the program as "useful" or "very useful", a satisfaction rate also reflected across each category individually.

This study makes important contributions to the field of partner yoga, being one of the first studies to investigate any aspect of partner yoga, and yielding positive outcome variables. The findings show that partner yoga can be helpful to couples in these circumstances. If partner yoga benefitted these caregiving couplets, then perhaps it could also benefit couples in other circumstances or generally. This research worked with specific outcome variables, so questions still remain about participants' lived experiences of the practice, as well as what meaning these had. The research focused on specific psychological well-being measures, and impacts upon the relationship itself are unknown. Extending this research, and addressing those questions, could serve to clarify what it is about the practice that worked well, and how.

**Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement course.** This program developed by Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) was reportedly modelled in structure and content after John Kabat Zinn's popular Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course. The study (Carson, et. al., 2004) sought to evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness-based intervention strategies, in terms of their impact on couple functioning and satisfaction,

and individual wellness. Participants saw significant improvements in levels of relationship satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, closeness, acceptance of one another, and relationship distress. Couple partners also saw improvements in levels of optimism, spirituality, and relaxation. Effects were maintained through three-month follow-up, and one day's mindfulness practice appeared to improve relationship happiness, stress coping efficacy, relationship stress, and perceptions of overall stress, for several days following.

Further analysis of the Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement program was performed in Bohy's (2010) doctoral thesis which used grounded theory to understand how couple partners applied the new mindfulness skills. It also sought to identify links between these mindfulness skills and the building of relationship resilience. Consistent with the Carson, et. al. (2004) study above, this study pointed to positive effects on couple functioning. It was found that couples experienced less: negative reactivity towards one another, defensiveness, stress, intensity and suddenness of disagreements, criticism, "stonewalling", "shutting down", and contempt. They also experienced more: understanding, acceptance, flexibility, openness to change, acceptance of influence from one another, empathy, ability to soothe and repair their connection, noticing of physical signs of distress, ability to manage negative emotions, feelings of relaxation and calm, positive feelings towards one another, intimacy, physical affection, vision of the future, and positivity in relationships with their children.

It was found that undergoing such a program can invite a range of beneficial experiences for the couple. Extension of this research could explore these couple experiences from couples' own perspectives. This could deepen understandings of the practice, its experience, and its meaning for participants.

**Theoretical discussion of partner yoga as transpersonal developmental practice.** In a theoretical contribution Swart (2011) briefly examined the concept of partner yoga from a transpersonal and somatic standpoint. It was asserted that the practice of partner yoga postures could mobilize personal development and differentiation processes. Some ideas about possible experiences in the practice were put forth, including connection, feeling connected, grounding in self, connecting with outside world, and connecting to self before attempting to deeply connect with other. ‘Special considerations’ were offered, including: (1) yoga-based self-development as a non-linear process that may require a lifetime to realize, and (2) a need for practitioners to accept the practice as loving and transformational. Many ideas in this theoretical piece appear to signal rich areas for future empirical research. In particular, the idea that partner yoga practice could support transpersonal development and differentiation emerge as ideas awaiting further empirical examination.

**Empirical study on breathwork for couples.** This study by Chou (2004) applied breathing interventions to couples over a series of three, five-hour weekend workshops, across the period of a month. Participant experiences were analyzed using phenomenological methods. Emerging themes pointed to significant changes in intimacy at both emotional and physical levels within the relationships. These changes seemed to be related to: an increased sense of connection and understanding developed during and after the practices, improved communication processes, heightened affection and emotional connection, improved perception of mutual support, encouragement of touch, and augmented sense of acceptance of one another. Participants also noted individual and life circumstance shifts. One participant shared the impression that her couple

seemed to have accomplished more within three workshops than it had in several months of therapy. Another participant, who reported being a marriage and family therapist, found breathwork to be the most powerful experience he had ever had, truly penetrating his *gut level* like nothing else.

Results of this study offer insights into participant experiences, possible areas for further exploration, and areas of caution. They show what might occur as couple participants engage in breathwork practices. Breathwork can be a part of partner yoga or be a distinct practice, and also many other partner yoga practices exist. Extension of this research would investigate a broad range of practices to see if similar themes emerge.

**Relational impacts of one partner's individual yoga practice.** A final contribution, by Ross, Bevans, Friedman, Williams, and Thomas (2014), was a large study using content analysis to measure impacts of individuals' pre-existing yoga practices upon their couples. Participants' reports of relational experiences were analyzed throughout the course of their yoga practices. The main emerging themes were: personal transformation where participants expressed feeling like a *new person* with fewer negative traits and more positive traits (see original article for list of traits), increased social interaction, improved coping, a new perception of self as capable of withstanding relationship losses and difficulties, and spiritual transcendence. Participants expressed a belief that relationships improved because of their own personal shifts in attitude and perspective in the yoga practice, leading to increased patience, kindness, mindfulness, and self-awareness. The authors postulated that a sense of community in group-based practices might have brought about a sense of belonging (deemed a spiritual gain) and access to new friendships (deemed a practical gain). It was also postulated that

this access to community underlay the other benefits.

This study offers information regarding relational experiences of an individual yoga practice. For this study, the participant is practicing alone and imports relational benefits into the couple system. Further research can investigate relational experiences where partners practice together, to explore parallel and joint practices.

### **Overview of Research on Mindfulness for Couples**

This next body of research includes studies investigating impacts of mindfulness upon couple relationships, where these practices are not linked to the Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement program, a partner yoga-based program already treated above.

**Use of psychometric measures only with no mindfulness training.** Below is a review of empirical studies that used psychometric devices to measure forms of mindfulness understood as accessible without formal training. Three sub-categories of this literature appear to be: (1) mindfulness and functionality; (2) mindfulness and psychological variables; (3) mindfulness and couple-specific experiences. Each is very briefly addressed below.

***Mindfulness and functionality.*** Associations have been measured between mindfulness and men's sexual aggression toward intimate partners (Gallagher, Hudepohl, & Parrott, 2010), and mindfulness and couples' coping with multiple sclerosis (Pakenham, & Samlos, 2013). In both populations mindfulness was found to be an important moderator: mindfulness interfered with the determinism of alcohol consumption upon behaviours of sexual coercion and aggression, so that those high in mindfulness were protected from these harmful effects of high doses of alcohol (Gallagher, Hudepohl, and Parrott). The presence of mindfulness also tended to

coincide with each better adjustment (in terms of depression and anxiety), relationship satisfaction, and overall dyadic adjustment (Pakenham, & Samlos). The findings beg further investigation in these and other populations, to weave together an understanding of relational mindfulness and partner yoga for couples.

***Mindfulness and psychological variables.*** In studies observing links between individual psychological variables and mindfulness, self-compassion was identified as significant in Schellekens, et. al. (2007), and Neff, & Beretvas (2013). Mindfulness was found by both studies to be co-varying with self-compassion, and interaction between these variables was associated with positive impacts upon the couple: decreased overall distress in interpersonal contexts, improved communication, and lower intrapsychic distress (Schellekens et. al.), as well as improved levels of perceived self-compassion, self-esteem, relational wellbeing, perceived relationship behaviour, attachment style expression, relational aggression, and ability to report accurately on the experience of romantic partner (Neff, & Beretvas).

Another variable found to co-vary with mindfulness is stress when providing care to a romantic partner suffering from mental illness. Perceived stress in these cases was found to improve with increased mindfulness (Priestley and McPherson, 2016). Finally, in another study, a link was found between mindfulness and differentiation of self, and these variables appeared to together contribute to relationship satisfaction (Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015a).

***Mindfulness and couple-specific experiences.*** Mindfulness in men was associated with higher levels of perceived attractiveness of them by women in speed-dating experiment (Janz, Pepping, & Halford, 2015). In another study (Khaddouma, Gordon, &

Bolden, 2015b), mindfulness was positively associated with many couple experiences: sexual satisfaction; observation and non-judgement of inner experience; describing and acting with awareness; relationship satisfaction; attending to *here and now* sensations; labelling of feelings; attending to internal experiences without the impediment of emotional reactions; attuning to partner's needs and desires; awareness of bodily experiences during sexual activity; and the ability to express sexuality with partner without self-judgement. It was specified that mindfulness may help to increase sexual satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction may help to increase overall relationship satisfaction by "strengthening the relational bond, promising intimacy, and increasing a sense of connection with one another" (Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015b).

Mindfulness during couple conflict was shown to be associated with improved HPA-axis regulation and cortisol recovery (Laurent, et. al., 2016). In another study (Khalifan & Barry, 2016), mindfulness during conflict was inversely correlated with attachment anxiety, trust, distress levels, and levels of disengagement during discussion of transgressions in early relationship phases, with higher trust in one's couple partner potentially buffering the effects of lower levels of mindfulness.

A positive interaction was found by Hertz (2013) between mindfulness and couple functioning as measured by the dyadic adjustment scale. Attachment style was found to mediate the effects of trait mindfulness on stress response. Mindfulness was also found to enhance relationship quality as measured by dyadic adjustment scores.

Links have been ascertained between mindfulness and various relationship variables, including attachment and dyadic adjustment. With these findings based in measures of pre-existing mindfulness, it would be relevant to explore impacts of

programs that seek to teach mindfulness. The studies that follow have taken that approach, with participants undergoing a mindfulness program and then having their outcomes measured. The mindfulness programs take many forms; the literature below is separated by category according to number of partners implicated and type of practice.

**One partner practicing MBSR alone.** Asber (2014), Gillespie (2013), and Gillespie, Davey, and Flemke, (2015) quantitatively evaluated impacts of one partner's training in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course. Both studies found positive impacts of mindfulness across various areas of functionality.

Asber (2014) found support for a presented construct of 'mindful relating', where mindfulness qualities in the practicing couple partner appeared to shape interactions within the couple. Gillespie (2013) described similar findings, without the construct of 'mindful relating'. Both authors turned to systems theory to explain their findings. Asber's (2014) demonstrated that the mindfulness training produced measurable levels of mindfulness in the practicing partner as well as increased capacity for intimacy and relationship satisfaction. This encouraged positive behaviours toward the non-practicing partner, positively impacting their relational experiences, and in turn prompting positive behaviours to be returned to the practicing partner. This was seen as maintaining a self-perpetuating, systemic cycle where the partners interact to co-create the whole couple while the whole couple acts upon and continues to shape its parts. The fact that the non-practicing partner was found to exhibit increased levels of mindfulness, despite only their partner having received the specific training, can be seen as a powerful demonstration of this systemic impact of mindfulness within the couple system.

Similarly, Gillespie's (2013) study found that the practicing partner experienced

three sub-categories of experiential shifts in relation to the couple partnership: (1) *perceptual shifts*, characterized by relational acceptance and attunement; (2) *behavioural shifts*, characterized by positive changes in communication, listening, response flexibility, and satisfying interactions; and (3) shifts in *self in relationship to other*, characterized by positive changes in impact of self on other and perception of one's self by partner. The non-practicing partner was shown to experience concurrent, systemically-driven changes (see original article for explanation of these categories and full results).

Gillespie, Davey, and Flemke (2015) used interpretative phenomenological analysis on reports by non-practicing partners, where the other partner had recently graduated from the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course. The study was predicated on the idea of *mindful relating* (Asber, 2014, above) whereby the experiences of one partner affected both the other partner and the whole couple.

The following themes emerged (sub-themes in brackets): (1) positive observations by partners (general positive perception, graduate's improved emotional balance); (2) perceived impact (perception of communications, impact on partner and relationship); and (3) meaning-making (appreciation, incongruence of meaning, continuing practice: partners differently experienced appreciation for the practice and its effects, made meaning from these experiences, and held ideas around the continuation of the practice and its importance).

Most non-practicing partners did not report that the larger patterns within the couple had shifted significantly, immediately following program completion. However, they did report smaller-scale shifts, and some reported an impression that practicing partners perceived significant shifts in small and large patterns. While practice

consistency was found to moderate this discrepancy between partners' experiences and the perception of changes, many questions remain. Further research could explore what might be responsible for these perceptive and experiential nuances.

McCarthy and Wald (2013) presented a link between practice of mindfulness by one couple partner, and heightening of intimacy across the couple, leading to improved psychological and sexual functioning. Improvements in sexual functioning were further understood as enhancing the couple's ability to overcome pre-existing relational issues within sexual and other aspects of the relationship.

Each of these studies (Asber, 2014; Gillespie, 2013; Gillespie, Davey, Flemke, 2015; and McCarthy and Wald, 2013) demonstrates that mindfulness practice by one partner is capable of imparting positive impacts upon the couple to which the practitioner belongs. This evidence provides important support for the idea that partner contemplative practice is a relational phenomenon, with effects that permeate the couple unit even regardless of whether or not its constituents are all practicing.

**Both partners practicing MBSR together.** Another portion of the literature had *both* couple partners trained in mindfulness together, using the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. Birnie, Garland, and Carlson (2010) recruited couples consisting of a cancer patient and their partner-caregiver, under the premise that cancer is highly distressing for both, but support programs tend to neglect the partner. Inclusion of the partner in such programs was expected to significantly increase programs success.

It was found that: (1) both patient and caregiving partner were in fact experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative psychological impacts of the cancer; (2) the MBSR program was effective, for both partners, in "reducing mood disturbance and

more physical symptoms of stress, as well as increasing levels of mindfulness”; and (3) there were beneficial impacts of each partner’s mindfulness training upon the other.

These findings help to substantiate the importance of mindfulness intervention for couples. Future research can investigate mindfulness practice within couples in different life circumstances or generally.

**Both partners practicing non-MBSR mindfulness together.** Another type of study taught mindfulness to both couple partners together, through different mindfulness-based programs *not* linked to the MBSR course reviewed above. Two studies used mindfulness to support couples’ transition to parenthood. Fisher, Hauk, Bayes, and Byrne (2012) employed a Mindfulness-Based Childhood Education program with pregnant women and their partners. This program taught mindfulness skills and experience, and feelings of involvement and control, since the underlying premise was that childbirth can feel for women that it happens “to them” and not “by them”.

Participants reported a significant sense of community and of empowerment, the former increasing especially for the support partners. Support partners also became inspired to take on an increasingly supportive role. Couples reported a newfound sense of calm and of ‘*team*’, with the mindfulness practices tending to be carried forward into the postpartum and newborn period. Couples reported feeling better equipped for the transition because of these changes.

Gambrel (2015) employed mindfulness and interpersonal activities “to develop skill for internal and interpersonal attunement”, equipping new parents with abilities for their early parenting experiences. This Mindful Transition to Parenthood program appeared to generate an array of positive impacts including personal changes, and improvements in

couple relationship. It also appeared to lead to better preparedness for baby and increased male involvement (see article for expanded list of impacts, including all sub-themes).

Three more studies are known to examine non-MBSR mindfulness practice in both partners. Nelson, Laurent, Bernstein, and Laurent (2017) focused on mindfulness for conflict-resolution, while Luedtke, Brandi, and Monson (2015), and Cano, Corley, Clark, and Martinez (2018) focused on treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, and chronic pain and relationship distress, accordingly.

The study by Nelson, Laurent, Bernstein, and Laurent (2017) guided couples through a conflict resolution-based psychotherapy session, monitoring autonomic attunement throughout the session with saliva samples. It was found that increases in mindfulness had a small effect, and the size of this effect increased along with increases in state mindfulness, when dispositional trait mindfulness was already measured as high. The study concluded that it was perspective-taking, but not mindfulness, that appeared to be connected to the type of autonomic nervous system attunement measured here.

This study provides a glimpse at the limitations of the otherwise positive effects and experiences of mindfulness for couples. The field of mindfulness is seen as in its infancy, and more limitations and other nuances are expected to emerge with continued investigation, including what this effect, above, could mean and entail. Mindfulness for couples, a similar construct to partner yoga for couples, is apparently not particularly connected to this measure of attunement as it exists within saliva samples of in-session couples. Further research would be required to elaborate upon the relationship between attunement and mindfulness.

The Mindfulness-Based Cognitive-Behavioural program (Luedtke, Brandi, Davis,

& Monson, 2015) modified cognitive-behavioural conjoint therapy to include mindfulness-building interventions for one couple in a case study. The couple was found to experience “significant improvements in their relationship”. A partner with post-military post-traumatic stress disorder experienced clinically-significant reductions in symptoms, believed to be resulting from the mindfulness interventions combined with the conventional psychotherapy.

Cano, Corley, Clark, and Martinez (2018) studied couples where one partner was affected by chronic pain, determining that both partners would be in need of augmented psychological capacities and resources.

It was found that mindfulness, acceptance, values-based action, and relational flexibility, together called Mindful Living and Relating, led to: pain management, involvement in cherished activities both separately and together, addressing own needs within the couple, and mindful communication. The participants became able to co-create a more satisfying and functional relationship experience, and this included but was not restricted to experiences surrounding the chronic pain. While the initial motivation for these participants was reportedly to quell a specific, difficult experience of chronic pain, more far-reaching, relational, and mutual impacts were enjoyed as well.

**Mindfulness for couples integrated into a course of traditional talking psychotherapy.** Several researchers have integrated mindfulness principles and strategies into a course of conventional talking psychotherapy, such as Beckman and Sarracco (2011) who did so with Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004), a dominant couple therapy modality. Mindfulness was said to have been integrated through ‘mindful knowing’, explained as knowing without judging, built by

directing attention to arising emotional states and then practicing acceptance without imposing judgment or criticism. Couples were encouraged to become curious, to know and understand these emotions.

It was found both at termination and six-month follow-up that the couple partners experienced significant decrease in tension after a year-long intervention. Perceptions of depressive symptomatology also decreased. Partners tended to attribute these changes to easing of conflict through mindfulness interventions, and to the resulting emotional management skills. Partners reported improved communication of needs within a context of decreased emotional intensity.

Another within-therapy couple-based study (Siegel, 2014) introduced a breathing intervention using mindful attending and self-reflection on arising emotion in the present moment. When the therapist became aware of emotional intensity in one of the partners, that partner was directed to focus on their breathing by observing inhalations and exhalations for a count of four each time. The experiencing couple partner reportedly experienced immediate shifting, with any skepticism they had expressed at the onset fading quickly away. Other positive experiences included increased awareness of own emotional states and their impacts upon self and other, increasingly open dialogue, lessening of rigidity in interactional patterns, and heightened emotional self-awareness.

Nanda (2013) treated relationally-oriented presenting issues through application of strategies to guide mindful dialogue and awareness. Participants felt a potential for relational change and possibility, in addition to reporting various specific improvements in self and relational functioning (see original text for expansion of findings).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an experiential approach using

mindfulness to promote therapeutic resolution through acceptance. There are currently two known studies that have extended this individual psychotherapy modality to the couple context.

A study by Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, and Davidson (2009) intended to increase couples' awareness of their reactions to negative relationship cycles by modifying standard ACT interventions for use in couples. ACT for couples appeared to decrease distress and increase satisfaction within the relationship. This was attributed by the authors to the process of decreased 'defusion'—the extent to which individuals become overtaken by their internal experiences. Participant increases in mindful acceptance allowed for participants' ability to deliberately manage their internal experiences. These effects were understood as promoting shifting away from negative interactional cycles and related distress. The couple partners were understood as becoming empowered to observe and process their internal experiences, and then to make more adaptive choices.

The second article on the topic of ACT for couples used a focused approach to treat infertility-related distress. This study by Peterson, and Eifert (2011) confirmed that couples were indeed distressed prior to therapy. Significant decreases in distress levels were found to occur following this course of therapy, and changes were maintained over at least one year.

It would appear that mindfulness for couples can be integrated into a psychotherapy modality to both support functioning (Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, & Davidson, 2009) and treat specific clinical issues (Peterson, & Eifert, 2011). The findings related to mindfulness for couples can be seen as offering support for the development of a line of research around the similar construct of partner yoga for couples.

**Reviews of the literature.** Atkinson (2010) found in a review of the literature that positive impacts of mindfulness for couples can be grouped into the following categories: (1) open awareness and attention regulation, (2) regulation of physiological arousal and emotion, (3) empathy, (4) sexuality, and (5) attachment.

A final contribution, by Gambrel and Keeling (2010), was another literature review. It outlined three important conclusions, that there is: (1) a significant lack of development of formal mindfulness-based interventions for couple therapy, (2) a nascent trend towards the utilization of mindfulness-oriented treatments but insufficient awareness on the part of the therapist as to the theoretical basis for these, and (3) insufficient evidence for the development of formal interventions, and more information is required. Gambrel and Keeling's concluding recommendations appear reflective of a field of study currently in its infancy. These directions for future research could be useful in expanding and developing understandings of mindfulness and partner yoga for couples.

### **Summary and Conclusion of Empirical Literature Review**

In sum, the insights gleaned from this review of the literature are: (1) couple contemplative practices (i.e. breathwork, mindfulness, partner yoga) are vaguely defined and not well-understood in the literature, spanning a variety of philosophical orientations and approaches, (2) there exists ample and increasing evidence that mindfulness for couples appears to be a significant experience worthy of further investigation, and (3) the themes of attachment, dyadic adjustment, and transpersonal development emerged in findings across this literature.

In conclusion, literature from primarily the past 5-10 years has begun to address experiences in mindfulness for couples. The term 'mindfulness' has been used to refer to

a wide range of practices applied in various ways. If mindfulness for couples is a similar construct to that of partner yoga for couples, and mindfulness for couples has found these positive results, then there would be a need for further empirical research in partner yoga for couples to continue to better understand these experiences. The findings on mindfulness for couples inform and guide the present research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Participants in this present research were asked about attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality experiences in partner yoga, based on these constructs emerging in a review of empirical literature on partner yoga for couples. Participants tended to relate richly to attachment and self-expansiveness as meaningful aspects of their experiences. Body-based experiences were also reported as meaningful. The major theories to which these constructs belong serve as theoretical frameworks for this research. Each of these theories is detailed below: (1) attachment, (2) interpersonal neurobiology, and (3) transpersonal development.

#### **Attachment Theory**

**Overview of attachment theory.** Attachment has become an expansive topic across the field of psychology. Origins of the theory are attributed to both John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, due to the interaction between and mutual amplification of their works. Bowlby (1958; 1969) first began to explore the nature of attachment bonds between mother and child, noting its peculiarity. Ainsworth & Bell (1970) and Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton (1971) further empirically investigated Bowlby's theories and organized findings into models for applied psychology. Other vital contributors to

the evolution of attachment theory include Hazan and Shaver (1987) who extended the theory beyond this mother-child relationship to have it encompass adult romantic relationships. For the purposes of this research, the sub-topic of intersubjective attachment is considered. This theory is based in several ideas:

- (1) During infant and toddler stages, the young human is naturally drawn to being in close proximity with those who ensure its survival, forming significantly bonded relationships that link them to primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1958; 1969).
- (2) Relational experiences during early development instill organized internal working models of emotional and behavioural patterns based in internalized representations for self and other (Bowlby, 1969).
- (3) These internal working models become developmentally entrenched (Ainsworth, et. al., 1978) and forge dispositional interpretational styles used to filter later understandings of self and others within relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).
- (4) Couple partners project internal working models onto one another, intersubjectively co-creating the relationship reality, through these interacting individual realities. Both partners experience one another through the interpretational styles and respond in accordance with what they perceive and believe (Diamond & Marrone, 2003).
- (5) Within this intersubjective relational experience, internal working models can gradually shift, according to what is being co-created. One's experience of self and other in any given moment is the result of an accumulation of lived experiences leading up to that moment. Partners see evolutionary shifting of their emotional and relational dispositions when the new relational context can disconfirm old, maladaptive patterns while building newer, more adaptive ones (Alexander & French, 1946)

**Relevant features of attachment theory.** In intersubjective attachment theories, relationships are dynamic and evolving, and relational patterns can shift across development (Diamond & Marrone, 2013). This shifting is born of gradual process work with plenty of current 'attachment-relevant experiences' lived by the couple (Mikulincer

& Shaver, 2007, p.118-120). A relational environment rich in these attachment experiences can potentiate new internal working models, weakening the associative patterns of previous models. The concept of ‘corrective emotional experience’ was coined by Alexander & French (1946) in reference to this developmental process. The concept of corrective experience was later extended to couple clinical work. It is now said that couples act as primary attachment relationships and that their experiences, both in and out of therapy, are developmentally laden (e.g., Johnson, 2004). Couple experiences can shift internal working models gradually toward a more secure, and less insecure functioning, so that the couple itself can impart a corrective experience (Johnson, 2004).

**Summary of attachment theory in partner yoga for couples.** The major attachment ideas important to this research are: (1) early relational experiences become developmentally entrenched and then shape internal working models, which in turn act as a lens filtering experiences and expressions in later couple relationships, (2) attachment-related patterns are developmental and intersubjective, gradually co-created across time and susceptible to gradual shifting due to corrective experiences.

A couple is a major attachment relationship during adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). It would appear relevant to use attachment as a lens through which to examine couples’ experiences of partner yoga. The partner yoga practice can be seen as a series of potential attachment-related experiences. It was noted above that general attachment theory is an expansive topic, reaching across the field of psychology. Its understanding of relational and developmental processes has become foundational to other topics. Indeed, attachment theory is foundational to the other two theoretical

frameworks of this research: interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal development. Therefore, the topic of attachment serves as underlying theme across these frameworks.

While attachment has already been used to understand interpersonal relationships and neurobiological functioning, and also transpersonal development, a holism (Smuts, 2010/1927) that integrates various aspects of the person is still emerging within the scope of attachment theory. Mindfulness for couples research has only begun to question what attachment processes might be underlying, and affected by, couple contemplative practice. Partner yoga for couples research has not yet used attachment to explore couple experiences. While attachment can serve the study of partner yoga for couples through its perspective on relational development and experiences, partner yoga can also, in turn, help to further expand the field of attachment. Through the application of attachment theory to couple experiences within an experiential framework that is body-based and holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) in nature, and encompassing of advanced developmental states, attachment theory can become further extended.

### **Interpersonal Neurobiology**

**Positioning of interpersonal neurobiology within the study of human relationships.** Dan Siegel (1999) is credited with conception of the field of interpersonal neurobiology. The field draws upon neurobiological investigations in seeking to understand emotion, wellbeing, and interpersonal process in key attachment relationships. Interpersonal neurobiology also includes the study of practices like meditation, mindfulness, and attunement, and their effect on personal as well as interpersonal development (e.g., Siegel, 2007). A salient characteristic of this literature is its bridging of individual experience, psychological theory, and neuroscience. For the purposes of

this research, individual experience and psychological theory are more strongly emphasized than neuroscience, allowing for relational process to remain at the forefront of the discussion.

**Relational potency in early development.** Investigative studies have consistently demonstrated that human brains are wired for interpersonal interaction and that they thrive when stimulated in close attachments (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014). Not all relationships are weighted equally when it comes to promoting human development and wellness. Some forms of close bond, such as the maternal-child attachment, are seen as especially *potent* (Siegel, 2007). Many interpersonal neurobiologists have written about maternal-child relationship potency as well as its implications for later relationships across the lifespan. Cozolino (2007) writes:

We do know that connection between mother and child is a potent determinant of brain development and adaptation. In an optimal situation, each is transfixed by the sights, sounds, and movements of the other, hungry to learn the language that would bridge the gap between them. The mother's impact on her child's brain is widespread and profound; early interactions build neural networks and establish patterns that can last a lifetime... In the other direction, a new mother's brain is stimulated to change and grow upon the birth of her child. Her brain is reshaped through a combination of pregnancy-related hormones and the intense sensory and emotional stimulation provided by her newborn (p.82).

This illustration is suggestive of a deeply connected bond, extraordinary in quality and effect. These early interactions serve to construct neuronal wiring patterns which are *fundamental* to later development and expression of self. Cozolino asserts that

“relationships become biological structure” (2007, p. 146), so that the implicit memories formed in early life, including of love and intimacy or shame and disconnect, directly impact a later sense of self and other (p.129-131).

In sum, the maternal relationship is classically potent, acting as impetus for the optimizing of development in both mother and child. The questions of what renders these relationships so potent, and how this potency then relates to adult relationships, are common within the field of interpersonal neurobiology. Many authors have investigated what causes some relationships to be deeply impactful and transformative. These contributions are discussed below.

**Relational potency across the subsequent lifespan.** The constructs below were identified in the literature as characteristics contributing to a potent, deeply connected, and transformative relational experience.

**Attunement.** Siegel (1999) writes about the relational experience of *feeling felt*, “direct communication” in which “one person needs to allow his state of mind to be influenced by the other” (1999, p. 70). This state is likened to “full emotional connection” and “feeling heard in the deepest sense” (Siegel, 1999, p. 70). Siegel goes on to state that “this attunement of states forms the nonverbal basis of collaborative, contingent communication” (Siegel, 1999, p. 70). Interpersonal attunement occurs when the internal state of one is attended to by the internal process of another, and the observer ‘gets’, or resonates with, and internally ‘holds’ it (Siegel, 2007, p. 27).

**Nonverbal connecting.** Fogel (2009) explains that *interpersonal movement*, a co-created phenomenon shown to occur automatically between mothers and their young children in well-functioning relationships (see p. 207-208), has also been shown to occur

in couple relationships. Nonverbal relating, including “comovement” (‘co-movement’) and touch, can create *experience-dependent neural pathways* that “allow the person’s nervous system to take over” and “help the person to find themselves” (207-208).

Because touch is a sense that is so deeply rooted in the nervous system, its experience can modulate the nervous system, such as through autonomic sensory neurons.

Eye contact is often seen as an important form of nonverbal relating. Cozolino (2007), for example, asserts that deep eye contact can allow for a highly intimate interactional experience, since so much about one’s internal state, including their autonomic activation, possible intentions, level of engagement, etc. can be apparent through their eyes (p.147; 164).

***Mirroring.*** Cozolino (2007) outlines how observing another human can activate important neurobiological centers, triggering “reflexive activation of motor systems” (p.190) in the observer. As these motor centers become activated, so too do the corresponding cognitive and affective experiences. It would be possible, then, to go beyond attuning to, or sensing, the internal state of the other, to actually experiencing parts of it, by having it become replicated through mirroring.

***Empathy.*** Cozolino (2007) has pointed to the fact that the areas of the brain (in primates) involved in mirroring processes light up during imaging studies regardless of whether the subject is actively (behaviourally) mirroring another or merely observing them (p. 193). Humans have the potential to both *understand* (cognitive mirroring) and *feel* (affective mirroring) others through mirroring. And because humans can feel parts of this lived experience of other, they can also access empathy towards it.

For Fishbane (2013), empathy is seen as the crucial factor in relational potency—when mutual empathy exists in the couple, deep experiences of mirroring, reflective processes, and *continual rapport* are possible. The aspect of knowing other beyond what can be immediately apparent, is emphasized. Awareness of one's own mirroring and resulting bodily experiences is said to form the basis through which empathy can occur.

***Emotional Contagion.*** Cozolino (2007) explores this subtle interpersonal process through which witnessing another in the present moment can give rise to automatically transmitted affect, where the observer 'catches' the emotional state of the observed. Cozolino has likened emotional contagion to *inspiration* in which the observer can experience important shifting, such as in ways of thinking, caused by mere exposure to the another exhibiting these. This relational mechanism is said to be powerful enough to allow contagion to occur even without conscious awareness of it happening. It can be possible to suddenly feel new affect without explicit knowledge of why, even for an otherwise self-aware partner. In a couple, there would be countless opportunities for affective states to be passed back and forth between partners, and for this affect, positive or negative, to become patterned and pervasive.

***Coregulation.*** Solomon & Tatkin (2011) rely heavily on the concept of coregulation in their Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy (PACT). Coregulation is a potent relational process in which couple partners mutually receive and interpret one another's signals while applying knowledge of the other to make meaning of these signals, and best respond to one another's needs. It is seen as optimal when both members of a couple can self-regulate, not only individually or in parallel, but also jointly, as a unit. A coregulating couple is understood as able to achieve psychophysiological calm and

psychological, attachment, satiety in its partners more reliably and efficiently than either of the individuals might alone.

***Intersubjectivity.*** Fogel (2009) uses this term to refer to a deeply connected state of being where “awareness is expanded beyond the body and to encompass also the other, like a shared state of consciousness” (p. 224). This sense of felt connection can result from any type of coregulated activity because a sense of *being with* is created within the *interpersonal resonance* of this coregulation. When intersubjectivity occurs within a secure attachment relationship, autonomic functioning becomes synchronized, and the couple seems to function as one. Fogel explains that this experience can be intentionally created by building awareness, as in techniques such as *listening touch*, commonly practiced in therapeutic touch disciplines (p.222-224).

In sum, discussion of potent relational experiences is common in interpersonal neurobiology, and experiences of attunement, nonverbal relating, mirroring, empathy, emotional contagion, coregulation, and intersubjectivity are understood as helping to create this potency. A final discussion will outline some individual and couple experiences seen as making possible these potent relational experiences.

**Experiences favourable to co-creation of a potent relationship.** Potent experiences are not common to every type of relational state. Instead, potent experiences are associated with advanced personal and interpersonal development, including optimal early development. According to Siegel (1999), “sensitivity to signals” is a prerequisite for attuned interrelating, in infancy (for parents) as well as in later adult attachments (for both couple partners). One’s own capacity to attune to oneself, developed through coregulatory developmental process in primary attachment relationships, forms the

potential through which one can become able to then attune to others—and both *personal attunement* and *interpersonal attunement* are seen as mutually reinforcing (p. 199).

Several experiences are seen as supportive of the development of a capacity for attunement. These include breath awareness practices (Siegel, 2007, p. 174), attending to the present moment (p. 187), and neural integration (p. 189-192).

This latter experience, neural integration, is itself a developmental process in which increasing neural connectivity is formed within and across neural centers. This is said to lead to *integrative wellbeing*, “a most integrative state which enables the most flexible, adaptive, and stable states to be created in a dynamical, complex system” (Siegel, 2007, p. 198). It can allow for improved awareness, communication between cognition and affect, recruiting of mental resources, improved healthfulness of interpersonal relating, boundaries, ability to process experiences and learn, and earned attachment security (see p. 204).

Fogel (2009) has specified that *embodied self-awareness* is key to both personal and interpersonal wellbeing, deeming this essential to biological and psychological survival, and an impetus for thriving (p. 12-15). Fogel encourages active cultivation of embodied self-awareness reaching beyond simple self-understanding (i.e., *conceptual self-awareness*) (p. 13-14). Embodied self-awareness entails a deep encounter with oneself from within, coming to *know* one’s self through experiences like body schema (p. 11, 26), interoception (p. 89-91), and proprioception (p. 87-89). This can lead to an increasing capacity to connect with detailed internal experiences (p. 10-11). Similarly to Siegel (above), Fogel refers to *functional integration*, attributing this to body-based

personal and joint practices including interpersonal movement, mindful breathing, and other self- and general-awareness practices (p. 209-212).

For Cozolino (2007), a calmed nervous system, through parasympathetic activation, is seen as essential for relational potency because in this state, individuals can remain socially engaged. With a well-modulated autonomic nervous system, an individual can maintain connection even despite an experience of threat (p. 89-91). This means that one could override stress responses and remain in calm connection through increased self-awareness and sufficient control (p. 60, 86, 115), where normally, any threat response would shift nervous system functioning away from connection and toward fight, flight, or freeze instincts.

Cozolino also asserts that “a more stimulated brain is a more complex, active, and resilient brain” (p.82), stressing that, at any developmental state and relational capacity, adequate stimulation empowers a movement in the direction of optimal growth and development.

**Summary and conclusions of interpersonal neurobiology in partner yoga for couples.** It is clear that, from this perspective, optimal personal development appears to impact subsequent couple experiences and development. The more optimal the early mother-child relationship in terms of the potent relational elements of attunement, nonverbal communication, mirroring, empathy, emotional contagion, coregulation, and intersubjectivity, the more potential an adult will have to transfer these automatically transmitted capacities onto subsequent relational experiences in later life. In turn, the more the adult would possess and be able to exercise these internal capacities, the more likely they would be to co-create a relationship with a capable other, that is itself potent,

deeply connected, and developmentally transformative. Siegel (2007) and others have used *potent* as a descriptive word when writing about these experiences. In the absence of other known, established language in the literature to name this experience, the present research has adopted '*potent relationship*' as a term used for that purpose.

This discussion explored deeply connected and developmentally transformative potent relational experiences. In conclusion, synthesis of the literature appears to suggest that relational potency *is* development—that transformative development is a core feature of potent relationship, and that within these relationships, there is a developmental motion whereby growth in the individual and couple are both present, and mutually-perpetuating. As this field is studying experiential nuances of deeply connected relationships, it is expected to be a meaningful lens through which to examine partner yoga for couples.

Inasmuch as interpersonal neurobiology can be useful in interpreting the evocative experiences of a partner yoga for couples practice, partner yoga can, in turn, also help to advance the field of interpersonal neurobiology. While interpersonal neurobiology has begun to investigate neurobiological and relational impacts of contemplative practices like meditation (e.g., Siegel, 2007), it has not yet been extended to yoga in general nor partner yoga for couples in particular. The contemplative practices investigated thus far have been individually-based. Mindfulness for couples research had found unique impacts upon a couple based on each individual mindfulness practices, and couple mindfulness practices. Similarly, it is expected that the joint contemplative practice of partner yoga for couples contribute unique findings within this field.

## Transpersonal Development

**The seminal contributions of The Atman Project.** The field of transpersonal psychology is vast and diffuse. It is sometimes said to encompass all of the psychospiritual theories and research, and sometimes is limited to specific Eastern Contemplative-Western psychological integrations (Kaspro & Scotton, 1999). One of its major contributing theorists, Ken Wilbur, has now distanced from the label and prior focus of ‘transpersonal psychology’, refocusing instead on the forging of Integral Theory (Wilbur, 2000). Still, the major work he had contributed, *The Atman Project* (1996), remains recognized as an exceedingly comprehensive model of transpersonal development (Kaspro & Scotton, 1999).

**Overview of transpersonal development theory.** Wilbur’s (1996) developmental theory integrates the works of various developmental psychologists with developmental models of various religious philosophies (see Wilbur, 1996, p.207-213 for a table of the main developmental perspectives synthesized therein). Several philosophical bases are outlined (p. 1-5). These are presented briefly, below, as a means through which to orient to this complex and dense theory:

- All beings are developing, and doing so according to predetermined developmental pathways laid out by the evolution of the species to which they belong (*ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*);
- Human beings begin in a state of fusion with their mothers. Across the developmental lifespan, the opposing points of *separation* and *unity*, and the tension between these, which arise as the individual works out its differentiation, serve as fundamental struggle and impetus for growth and development (*general psychoanalytic theory*);
- Everywhere in nature there are only *wholes*. These complete wholes are hierarchical to each other, in that some wholes can be part of other wholes. Multiple levels of wholes exist, and larger-order wholes contain smaller-

order wholes. Each of these wholes is a dynamic and creative *system* (*holism*);

- Human beings and human consciousness, too, are wholes which fit into the presumed largest-order whole possible, the Cosmos. The dynamic and creative forces within the individual, which drive it, are understood as evolution itself (*evolutionary theory*);
- Any whole at any level of consciousness eventually becomes a part of the whole of the next developmental stage. The prior developmental whole is transcended through normal, perpetual growth process, and new levels of consciousness emerge. These are integrated (as parts) into the prior whole, and then the individual can differentiate from that prior level of consciousness, with the prior whole self fully transcended. This process is seen as cumulative and ongoing, building and reaching higher orders until a supposed ultimate level of consciousness—Atman—is reached (*The Atman Project*).

An increasingly mature and integrated consciousness is developing across the process of normal development. Across the lifespan, the self firstly develops, then evolves and integrates, and ultimately could be transcended (Wilbur, 1996).

**Three main developmental phases.** In Wilbur's (1996) model, there exists three developmental phases, each consisting of numerous developmental stages. The three phases are: (1) prepersonal development, (2) personal development, and (3) transpersonal development. In prepersonal development, the very young child is seen as beginning in a state of utter fusion with its mother. The child then comes to develop early senses of self, based first in bodily sensation, and later, in parts of their environment with which they are still unified; the child is not yet a whole, but rather is a part of other. With the eventual enhancement of cognitive capacities, a child is seen as gradually developing an ego, and thus officially entering the next stage, of personal development.

This second stage is long and involved, typically spanning much of childhood and all of adulthood. It entails development of the ego, including advanced cognitive

capacities like morality and intellectuality. The theory states that inasmuch as the ego develops, the ego is also to be transcended, just the same as were elements in the prior phase. In this process, fragments of self, such as the shadow, internal conflicts, introjects, the unconscious, etc. all enter into awareness and become integrated together into a cohesive, continuous, spontaneously expressing self that can act wholly and with intentionality (p.73). Integration, in this way, refers to consolidation of prior states of self into a cohesive, continuous, whole system. Transcending of ego is the gateway for the next, transpersonal phase, including the most advanced and rarest developmental experiences which Western psychology by and large does not address (Wilbur, 1996). Key experiences of a self that is verging on transpersonal development include *spontaneity, autonomy, and self-actualization*. These are said to allow for true freedom, of action, and in being. Another key experience is *intentionality*, allowing for internal access to the *meaning and purpose* of existentialism (Wilbur, 1996).

Across the transpersonal phase the self evolves and ultimately transcends itself, arriving at ultimate unification with '*post-consciousness*'. In this self-state—or post-self-state—there is only oneness, self-as-divine. Access to these evolutionary stages is afforded by highly dedicated, long-term and in-depth practitioners of a contemplative, openly spiritual, system, in total harmony with the practitioner's own meaning and purpose (Wilbur, 1996). Evolution through the three major developmental phases means moving past utter dependence, then across increasing independence, and toward the inborn realization of absolute interdependence in the unity and oneness of all.

**Additional features of the developmental model.** Just like the psychoanalysis upon which this theory is based, Wilbur fathoms a theoretical, optimal developmental

motion which is steady, linear, complete, and without developmental crises or arrest. This is recognized, however, as unattainable by most and in most stages. Some significant difficulties are inevitable. At a point of developmental arrest, *symptoms* of the dysfunction are emitted by the unconscious, and global functioning of the individual can be compromised. Because most individuals will be presenting, in most moments of their lives, with at least some unresolved developmental tasks, they are likely to exhibit some degree of dysregulation and dysfunction at any given time. Where this is the case, either formal psychotherapy or some therapeutic experience is necessary, to attend to and resolve the underlying issue, thus allowing optimal development to resume.

*Symbolism* is a term employed by Wilbur to convey an indirect or figurative nature of striving. The entire developmental process is seen as symbolic, since the quest for *unity* is not seeking literal joining, as in a concrete bodily sense. Unity instead refers to *becoming*—an evolutionary transcendence—which renders the quality of self or consciousness increasingly like that of the ultimate divine (Wilbur, 1996). Another way that Wilbur uses symbolism is in the *translation* of abstract psychic material into more concrete representations within the body, such as with symptoms.

#### **Summary of transpersonal developmental theory in partner yoga for couples.**

The ultimate purpose of and impetus for evolution in this theory is *unity*. The self firstly evolves to differentiate from others (prepersonal phase), then develops within itself (personal phase), and then eventually evolves to transcend even itself, unifying with the basic divine essence beyond the confines of the ‘gross’ tangible world (transpersonal phase). The constructs of *integration*, *immediate present*, *self-actualization*, *intentionality*, and *symbolism* are pertinent, particularly across the personal development

phase where most human adults reside. The Hinduism and Vedanta that forms the basis of transpersonal development theory also created the practice of yoga. Because of these shared frameworks and worldviews, transpersonal development theory is expected to be a meaningful lens through which to examine partner yoga for couples.

As much as transpersonal development theory is well-suited to the examination of partner yoga for couples experiences, partner yoga is also expected to render meaningful contributions for transpersonal development. In the yogic and Hindu traditions, it is believed that yoga is the holistic spiritual and wellness system that can purify and develop mind and body, and bring individuals to increasingly refined states of being and advanced stages of development (Sivananda, 1941/1999). These ideas are not commonly investigated from a Western empirical framework or from a phenomenological perspective. They have also not been systematically examined through a couple context, as ancient wisdom in the yogic and Hindu traditions, and also transpersonal development theory, see these practices as relational, but individually-based, developmental processes (Wilbur, 1996). The question of contemplative practice within an explicitly relational context, and how this might be experienced, is a new application of these ideas.

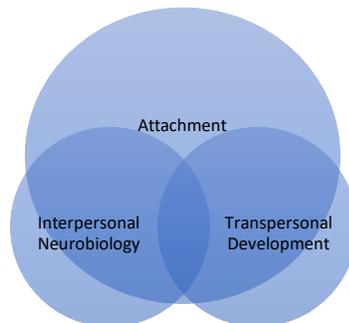
### **Summary and Conclusions of Theoretical Frameworks: An Integrative Model of Relational Connecting**

The theories of attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and transpersonal psychology are vast and complex. Each is inherently relational, and each integrates multiple aspects of the self. The theory of attachment is basic to both interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal psychology, forming the theoretical and philosophical bases of these other theories. Interpersonal neurobiology is explicitly concerned with

attachment relationships and potent experiences therein, and attachment is under frequent investigation in that field. Both interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal development are developmental theories, and the developmental processes they address are largely informed by attachment.

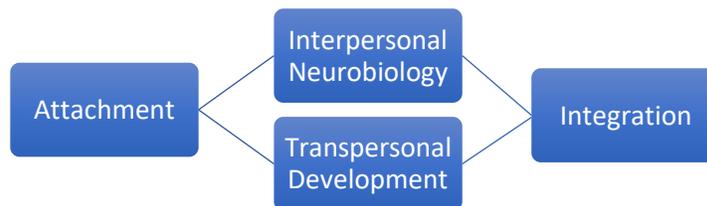
For interpersonal neurobiology, the more optimal the early attachment experiences, the more capable the later adult would be at forming potent attachment relationships that are, in turn, optimizing of further personal and relational development in potent attachment relationships. For transpersonal development, the individual progresses through an initial stage of absolute dependency upon the primary attachment figure. The more optimal and complete the separation experiences, resulting in resolution of this dependency, the better aligned the later adult would be to move through the subsequent personal and transpersonal development phases. While attachment is an important underlying basis for both of the other theories, each also includes other theoretical bases. The relationship between the three theories can be depicted as follows in figure 3.1 below:

Figure 3.1: Relationship between the theoretical frameworks.



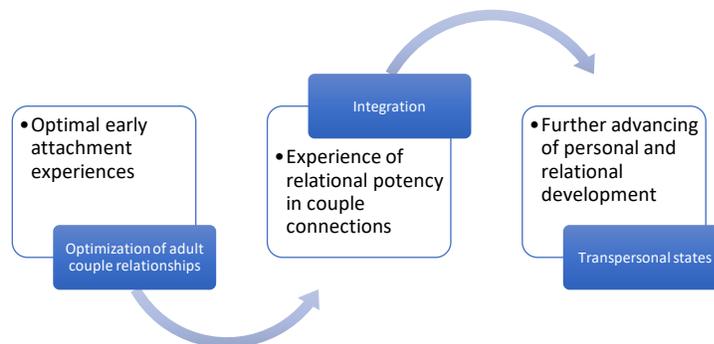
*Integration* is a concept common to both interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal development. For both of these theories, integration refers to advanced developmental process relevant to potent relational connection experiences. In interpersonal neurobiology, neural integration is a psychophysiological development process by which increasing connectivity is established between neurons and neuronal centres across the nervous system, resulting in improved communication between its parts (Siegel, 2007). In transpersonal development theory, integration is a psychospiritual developmental process by which parts of the individual are brought into conscious awareness and consolidated together into a cohesive, whole self. Integration is the prime developmental task in the final (‘Centauric’) stage of personal development, allowing subsequent access to the realm of transpersonal developmental (Wilbur, 1996). To both of these theories, integration is an important developmental process establishing connections between parts of the self and consolidating them, known and unknown, distant and proximal, into a cohesive whole, thereby accessing ultimate personal and relational experiences in the most advanced development, beyond. The relationship between the three theories and integration can be depicted as follows in figure 3.2 below:

Figure 3.2: Relationship between the theoretical frameworks and integration.



While each of the integration theories focuses on different aspects of the person (i.e., brain, body, and psychology vs. psychology and spirituality), they both ultimately seek to deal with the whole, and developmental processes and outcomes are common to both. This could be suggestive of a broad developmental phenomenon, encompassing the human as a whole. As was seen earlier in this thesis, Smuts (2010/1927), asserted that the more parts of the human system considered and integrated together, the more thorough the understanding attained of the human being. Consolidated into a single model, an integrative, interpersonal neurobiological and transpersonal developmental process would encompass multiple aspects of the personal and relational self. This integrative mode of relational connecting might be depicted as follows, in the proposed Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting (see figure 3.3):

Figure 3.3: The Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting.



### Definition of Terms

Several key constructs have been discussed across the past theoretical framework sections which have discussed attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and transpersonal development theories. These concepts are presented below in table 3.1 so as to index

their definitions.

Table 3.1: Relevant Constructs Across the Theoretical Frameworks.

<b>Field of Study</b>	<b>Construct Name</b>	<b>Essential Meaning of Construct</b>
<u>Attachment Theory</u>		
	<i>Internal working model</i>	Dispositional patterns of interpretation, affect, and behaviour shaping relational style, based on internalized representations of self and other.
	<i>Corrective experience</i>	Relational affective experience challenging existing attachment patterns and promoting attachment security.
<u>Interpersonal Neurobiology</u>		
	<i>Relational potency</i>	Experience in optimal development where a couple is deeply connected and developmentally transformative.
	<i>Interpersonal movement</i>	Relational experience in which synchronous movements are co-created between attuned partners.
	<i>Attunement</i>	Connection experience where one's internal world attends to, senses, and is affected by another's.
	<i>Nonverbal connecting</i>	Relational interactions relying on exchanges of signals through body-based means outside of language.
	<i>Mirroring</i>	An automatic relational process where attending to other prompts similar neural patterns in observer and actor.
	<i>Empathy</i>	Cognitive and affective experience allowing for deep understanding and holding of the experience of another.
	<i>Emotional contagion</i>	Automatic transmission of an emotional state across individuals, perhaps outside of conscious awareness.
	<i>Coregulation</i>	Ongoing mutual awareness of and responsiveness in a couple to needs and states of self, other, and dyad.
	<i>Intersubjectivity</i>	A state of expanded awareness where self-awareness can encompass a close other.
	<i>Neural integration</i>	Increasing connectivity in neural wiring within and between neural centers.
<u>Transpersonal Development</u>		
	<i>Unity</i>	The ultimate striving; self-development toward reunification with its essential source.
	<i>Integration</i>	Advanced self-development all parts of self in 'gross' realm of experience act cohesively together.
	<i>Immediate present</i>	A tensed condition of reality with awareness in present time and space, supporting advancing of development.
	<i>Self-actualization</i>	An intrinsic, ongoing striving for self-betterment and higher self-development, one's potential.

	<i>Intentionality</i>	The ability to act consciously and deliberately through a whole cohesive self.
	<i>Symbolism</i>	Indirect representation, through bodily experiences, of developmental elements or repressed psychic material.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Participants**

**Selection criteria.** This research investigated couple experiences in the partner yoga practice. Phenomenological methods require that participants be selected on the basis of having experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Englander, 2012). The participants in this study experienced partner yoga during the research workshop series, and those workshop experiences formed the basis of their research interviews. Recruitment, therefore, focused on selecting participants who were capable of and interested in having, and then articulating, these experiences.

The sample of participants consisted of eleven romantic couples that self-identified as serious and committed. Each couple had been together for at least two years. This was in keeping with the idea that relationships undergo significant evolution around that point. Couples can see experiences such as attachment expressions, projections, conflict, unmet needs and expectations, etc., beginning to present themselves more saliently (Gottman, 1999). Couples are understood as needing to continue developing in order to find, or else create, a stable dynamic that transcends these difficulties (Gottman, 1999). After the two-year mark, couples were seen as likely having already lived some of this process together. All couples were cohabiting full-time, and so were in close contact and sharing ample joint experiences in their daily life.

The couples did not identify as maintaining or as ever having maintained their own personal yoga practices. While some yoga experience was acceptable, exposure had to be limited. If one was guiding their own practices, they were understood as already immersed in a yoga experience. This research was interested in emergences of couple experiences in the practice, and it was thought that an involved, pre-existing relationship with the practice might interfere with that process. The inclusion criteria used to screen potential participants and ensure their goodness of fit for this study were:

- (1) Couples must be involved in a serious, committed relationship for two years or longer, and must currently be living together full-time.
- (2) Couples must self-identify as not maintaining a personal yoga practice, past or present, and must have no, or limited, overall exposure to yoga.
- (3) Couples must be willing and able participants in the study, and must read, agree to, and sign the informed consent document provided by the researcher.

**Recruitment.** Recruitment methods made use of professional and extended social networks of the researcher and thesis advisors, including social media and community and event boards. Posters were also displayed in the Saint Paul University Counselling Centre as well as in several other local centres, and a ‘list serve’ email was sent out to all previous graduates of the Saint Paul Counselling & Spirituality Master’s degree program. It was an electronic posting on an Ottawa community sub-Reddit board that brought in the majority of participants.

Participants in phenomenological research generally form a rather homogeneous sample (Larkin, & Thompson, 2012), based on their shared experiences. The participants in this research were pooled from the general population as well as from the Ottawa community of psychotherapists and training psychotherapists. Psychotherapists and

training psychotherapists were sought out based on the idea that their training would allow for awareness of their internal and relational experiences. They were also expected to be able to reflect on and articulate these experiences during the IPA interviews. In the final research sample, two of the eleven couples self-identified as containing a psychotherapist or training psychotherapist couple partner.

The suggested number of participants for conducting effective interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research differs across the literature. This number has been said to range from one to fifteen or more (Smith, & Osborn, 2007, p.56). A mid-range number of seven participants, recommended by research methods author Creswell (2007), is popular. This research heeded these guidelines, with the final research sample including eleven couples.

### **Procedure**

**Sequence of events for participants.** The following research stages were experienced by the participants: (1) recruitment; (2) email exchanges providing participants with an informed consent form and sociodemographic questionnaire, and scheduling their interviews; (3) a group meeting serving as researcher-participant contact prior to the first workshop, presenting the general topic, “couple experiences of partner yoga”, and beginning to co-create a working relational alliance (Englander, 2012; Wertz, 2005); (4) a sequence of four partner yoga workshops; and (5) a meeting with the researcher following the last workshop (within about one week’s delay) for the IPA interview.

**Partner yoga for couples workshops.** The partner yoga for couples program consisted of four workshops, each structured according to the traditional Sivananda yoga

class format. This format includes, in sequence: *savasana* (relaxation), *bhakti* (opening chanting/devotion), *pranayama* (controlled breathing), *surya namaskar* (sun salutations), the classical 12 *asanas* (physical postures), *savasana* (relaxation), *dhyana* (meditation), and then *bhakti* (closing chanting/devotion).

Because of the vast range of yoga theory and practice, it is understood that no single approach to yoga, or workshop format, could achieve a fully ‘pure’ or ‘complete’ application of yoga. This Sivananda structure was selected because it is an accessible teaching, in line with the traditional Hindu system of ancient philosophy and practice (see Swami Vishnu-devananda, 1959) originating in the sacred texts of Hinduism (i.e.: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and Bhagavad Gita in the Vedic texts). This format is universally applied by the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Organization and was taught to the researcher when undergoing certification for yoga teacher training with this organization. It has been practiced and taught by the researcher since the year 2010.

The workshops took place on a weekly basis over four consecutive Sundays, and were each approximately three hours long. This schedule is consistent with other programs described in the literature on partner yoga and mindfulness for couples (see for example: Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, 2015; Luedtke, et.al., 2015; Milbury et. al., 2015; Birnie, Garland, & Carlson, 2010; Carson, et. al., 2004). The workshops were held in a large private room at Saint Paul University.

The three-hour partner yoga workshops applied the standard 90-minute Sivananda yoga practice, followed by a 90-minute couple version of that practice. In the first half of the practice, couple partners were practicing in parallel, and in the second half, they were practicing jointly.

**Interviews.** The researcher conducted face-to-face, in-depth IPA interviews with participants to hear their experiences (Englander, 2012). Some research has interviewed couples as a unit as opposed to interviewing individual couple partners separately, and this is the case for most articles reviewed for this research. With mindful relating (Asber, 2014) and systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1973) referenced across the empirical literature, the couple is conceived of, in this line of research, as a meaningful unit in itself. If separating the whole into its parts, aspects of the couple experience are likely to be obscured. The couple experience is that which is of interest. As was seen, much research has already been conducted on yoga for individuals, and mindfulness for couples, and despite this, little research has been conducted specifically on partner yoga for couples. The decision to collect data on the couple, rather than on the individual, is therefore one of the important contributions of this research. Couple partners were found to be most often in agreement or actively co-creating meaning together. Occasionally there appeared to be two emerging narratives, as couple partners disagreed or shared differing perspectives.

The interview questions were broad and basic, so that the participants' experiences could enter into their conscious awareness and become salient. The researcher aimed to allow the couples ample time to reflect and respond, and the researcher frequently checked in with participants to see if there was more they wanted to say before moving on to the next question. The researcher also aimed to follow the participants' lead as much as possible, to limit imposing undue structure upon them. Use of pauses and silence was found to encourage further reflection and expression. These strategies were used to encourage participants to remain focussed on, and to fully express, their

experiences (Englander, 2012).

According to Englander (2012, p.26), the first question posed in an IPA interview should simply ask for a description of the phenomenon having been experienced. Subsequent questions should then be “following the response of the interviewee with a focus on the phenomenon”. The IPA interviews in this research adhered to this suggested structure; the researcher began each interview by asking the couples: (1) how did you experience the partner yoga practice? and (2) what meaning did you make of these experiences? (see Appendix F for full list of interview questions).

It is consistent with an IPA perspective to acknowledge that some research subjects may require more specific questions to be asked. The Heideggerian-inclined researcher might use interpretive strategy to “bring in hypotheses, theories, existential assumptions, and so on” (Englander, 2012, p.33). In this research, pure phenomenological discussions, and elaborations, took place first (i.e.: regarding the experience and meaning of partner yoga for couples, for each couple), followed by specific questions informed by empirical research (i.e. interpretative questions regarding attachment, couple functioning, transpersonal development, and spirituality).

The interview data was collected through both audio and video recording in order to capture all levels of interaction within the subject-subject and subject-phenomenon spaces (Englander, 2012). The audio data was used for the purposes of this research, while the video data will be used in future research. This decision to utilize the audio data exclusively was in keeping with the striving in IPA to immerse, with as much depth as possible, in the participant’s subjective lived experiences.

**Plan of Analysis.** In IPA, the researcher is led to deeply immerse in participants’

lived experiences in order to discover their meaning, not from the researcher's frameworks, but from *within* the experience of the subjects themselves (Wertz, 2005). After repeated readings of the texts, "the researcher not only attends to what is experienced but also reflects on the how—the psychological processes: bodily, perceptual, emotional, imaginative, linguistic, social behavioural, and so on" (Wertz, 2005). The researcher is then able to *intentionally* analyze and place structure upon the collected data (Biggerstaff, 2008). Since the subjective reality of the researcher could never effectively be suspended (Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2012), the researcher is implored to use, rather than to attempt to factor out, the self. The self then can become one element within the intersubjective co-creation of meaning with the IPA process. The researcher may discern nuances and patterns in individual and collective accounts of experience, interpreting participants' expressions until a sense of the deeper, comprehensive meaning is achieved. According to Wertz (2005), "the phenomenological researcher does not remain content to grasp the obvious or explicit meanings but reads between the lines and deeply interrogates in order to gain access to implicit dimensions of the experience-situation complex". What is valued in IPA is a developed sense of the whole, experiencing person within their cumulative and subjective lived experiences, summed across a number of different participants.

The data analysis steps for this research were in keeping with IPA methodology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), as follows:

- (1) reviewing the recordings and transcriptions multiple times, to fully immerse in participant experiences and pick up on nuances (Wertz, 2005; Hycner, 1985);
- (2) making exploratory notes of researcher impressions, links and patterns, questions, conceptualizations, possible interpretations, etc.;

- (3) reviewing the transcription again, with exploratory notes;
- (4) making notes of emerging themes and checking back on verbatim and exploratory notes to verify for soundness of impressions;
- (5) amassing all emerging themes together, away from verbatim and exploratory notes, to review for consistency, language nuances, and overall impression, and to make minor adjustments;
- (6) organizing emerging themes into categories according to research question being answered, exploring possible relationships between emerging themes;
- (7) returning to the literature to explore emerging themes within these contexts;
- (8) returning again to emerging themes to cluster and interpret meaning according within the contexts of theoretical frameworks;
- (9) declaring of findings and writing of results and discussions.

**External verification.** External verification is seldom used in IPA due to the emphasis in IPA on intersubjective co-creating of meaning, and also because the phenomenological philosophies view interpretation itself as subjective rather than objective (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This research did nevertheless make use of an external third-party reviewer, in accordance with the university's graduate research norms. The reviewer was a graduate student in psychology who had been trained in IPA methodology. This third-party review served as an additional verification process to establish soundness of analysis and findings for one randomly selected case (i.e.: inter-rater reliability; see 'member check': Creswell, 2007). The reviewer's impressions were then shared with the thesis committee. Committee members had also reviewed the general methodology and one couple case. One committee member, a practitioner of IPA, was frequently consulted across the data collection and analysis stages to ensure proper and appropriate application of the method. Another committee member also reviewed the analysis of one couple case, to verify for soundness of the researcher's

interpretative process. Convergence of impressions by external reviewer and committee members allowed for the determining of confidence in the researcher's application of the method.

**Bracketing.** The researcher could be at risk of biases on several levels, having been exposed before to various aspects of the research topic. In addition to the typical threat of bias generally existing in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2007), this researcher is also an instructor and student of yoga and Hinduism, a partner yoga practitioner, and a marital partner where this is practiced by the couple. The researcher is deeply entrenched in potent relational process through her marriage and role of mother to a young child. The researcher is also a practicing Registered Psychotherapist who treats clients in accordance with the theories and practices included in this research.

The researcher recognized at the outset that these roles could engender bias and that effective bracketing would be required so as not to allow researcher assumptions to contaminate participant experiences. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), bracketing is a collection of methods used to control researcher bias, preventing this from contaminating the purity of participant reports. In IPA, the intersubjective meaning-making process necessitates that bracketing be reflective and also cyclical throughout the research process (see p. 35). Below is a list of steps that the researcher has taken to reduce bias (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

- (1) Reflecting upon and documenting researcher preconceptions related to the subject matter and/or participants.
- (2) Holding awareness of own internal processes while teaching the workshops and encountering the participants—the researcher watched self closely to ensure that the usual attitude of focus was present while teaching, and that any specific observations made were held with neutrality and non-attachment.

- (3) Intentionally reviewing interview questions and frameworks prior to each interview while reflecting on the role and stance of the researcher in IPA.
- (4) Monitoring own degree of immersion and engagement with participants and their reports of lived experience during the interviews; using attending and attunement skills to allow self to develop internalized sense of participants based as much as possible in *their own* realities.
- (5) Documenting initial reactions and assumptions during and following each interview. Holding these initial impressions tentatively while maintaining curiosity and investigative stance.
- (6) Performing several reads and re-reads of interview transcripts so as to further seek to connect deeply with participants and their subjective lived experiences.
- (7) Noting a range of personal processes such as questioning, forming of impressions, discerning of patterns, in the exploratory comments.
- (8) Returning as needed to the literature to verify impressions and to re-orient in the existing theoretical frameworks; returning as needed to the verbatim to re-orient in pure participant reports.
- (9) Utilizing periodic distancing to titrate immersion in participant data and to quell any projections that might be occurring.
- (10) Continuing to reflect, verify, document, and titrate during the declaration of findings and write-up stages.

One other possible source of contamination of the findings was recognized: the impact of the researcher being the person to both instruct the partner yoga workshops and conduct the IPA interviews. This was seen as presenting the threat of biasing participant responses, particularly in terms of activating positively-skewed response styles. Despite these concerns, it was necessary for the researcher to teach the partner yoga workshops, due to a scarcity of partner yoga instructors. This possible biasing was therefore taken into consideration in two principle ways:

Firstly, each couple was presented with a speech immediately prior to their interviews, explaining that there are “no right or wrong answers”, that there are no

specific expectations that the researcher has, that the research is explorative, and that absolutely anything that feels relevant in any way to the couple is welcomed by the researcher. All couples confirmed understanding, and reported having no questions.

Secondly, following the collection of data, participant responses were inspected for evidence of possible skewing of responses, and no such evidence had emerged. If a couple had indeed been influenced by their prior contact with the researcher in such a way as to engender a positively-skewed response style, an absence of balanced reporting, excluding of negative (challenging or disliking) aspects of experience would be expected.

It was found, rather, that every couple did report some range of experiences, including more and less enjoyable aspects, and every couple also spoke to some perceived “challenge”, “difficulty”, “risk”, or conflicts within the practice. For example, one couple partner reported a sense of conflict between the practice and his morality (around the “re-appropriation” of yoga), and many couples spoke to strong preferences of either the parallel or joint aspects of the practice, and a comparative disliking of the other part. The presence of this range of experiences in their reporting was understood as confirmation that the participants felt comfortable enough to express themselves honestly in their interviews.

### **Ethics and Protection of Human Rights**

**Informed consent.** The principles of informed consent were upheld across the research process. When potential participants expressed interest in the study, they were sent by email an electronic copy of the consent form, containing information relevant to their deciding whether or not to participate. Participants also read on the informed

consent form that they could withdraw at any time. Each individual couple partner was required to provide informed consent before the couple could participate. If ever one couple partner had wanted to withdraw, the whole couple would have had to withdraw.

**Confidentiality.** All information related to participants in this study is considered confidential. Names of couple partners were concealed by reducing these to their first initials only and couple number (e.g.: ‘Couple #1: A&M’). This pairing of couple number and initials was used to categorize and track all participant data. The participant files, including sociodemographic questionnaires, interview transcriptions and mark-ups, and all other information collected for this and further research, will be retained in electronic format. This information will be stored on an encrypted and password-protected USB key that is kept in the researcher’s home in a safe place, for a period of six years after the study. Any information stored on the researcher’s computer at any time will be password-protected.

**Vulnerable populations.** Measures were taken to anticipate and minimize potential harm to the participants through their participation. While the research was not seeking to work with participants belonging to any known sensitive populations, the immersive, experiential nature of yoga means that participants could have an evocative experience. This evocative nature of experience can also become magnified by the presence of a close, intimate other (their couple partner). Psychotherapy would have been made available to any couple or individual who would have encountered emotional or relational difficulty as a result of the practice. Interviews were structured with a focus on the immediate present and recent past (covering the course of the study). This was to remain focused on what is most relevant while also helping to avoid triggering of core

wounds or distress. The researcher was prepared to use de-escalation and containment skills, and to steer couples away from any conflict that appeared to be escalating during the interview. The researcher was also prepared maintain a focus on checking in with the couple to collaborate in these processes, wherever necessary and possible.

As the interviews played out, there were no salient moments of conflict escalation or evident triggering. While it is possible that the researcher engaged in perhaps subtle relational interventions, such as coregulation or nonverbal communication, in a more automatic way while striving to engage authentically and congruently with the participants, no specific de-escalation or contain strategies were intentionally used, or seen as necessary, by the researcher.

**Compensation.** The participant couples were offered a nominal fifteen-dollar compensation for each visit. The study required five visits, including four workshops and the interview. This fee was intended to help buffer some of the costs that may have been incurred through their participating, such as for childcare or transport.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS

#### **Part One: Overview of Participant Experiences**

IPA research methodology and philosophy recognize the participant as entrenched in their own subjective lived experiences and personal meanings (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The findings are presented accordingly, with an emphasis on couples' stories. Following these stories is a section on each: emerging themes in overall accounts of experience, accounts of specific experiences, and perspectives on what partner yoga is and can mean for couples.

**Couple #1: A&M; “We were actively connecting, actively relying on each other, and doing something actively together in the moment”.** A and M had been together for about two years and living together for three. Both partners attended occasional virtual or in-person yoga classes and had never before practiced partner yoga together. The couple brought to light their experience of “interdependence” and “collaboration” within partner yoga, which felt like new experiences to them. Both partners saw “attunement”, a key experience, as being achieved through active engagement and nonverbal communication. This attunement reportedly allowed for a sense of deep understanding and deep, “spiritual connection” described as feeling like “there’s this string that goes from my heart to your heart”.

Both A and M shared that the partner tree pose was their favourite. For A, “it was the easiest”, relaxing and being supported by M, while for M, “it was the hardest, because I had to support your weight”. A expressed concern at the imbalance of “supporting” in the couple, a reported insecurity of A’s. M turned to A with a clarification: “yes, I had to work to support you, but also, being able to lean on you at the same time made it easier to balance than it would’ve been on my own without you”.

The interdependence they spoke frequently of, with each partner serving at once as balance and counterbalance was also seen as “analogous” to the experience of figuratively ‘balancing’ and ‘counterbalancing’ together in everyday couple life.

**Couple #2: V&G; “A hundred percent positive, a hundred percent in the moment, a hundred percent trying to work toward the posture we are doing”.** V and G had been together for four years and living together a few months less. Both had been attending occasional power yoga classes, sometimes together. The couple reported an

important experience of emotional connection, attributing this to a sense of “a hundred percent relaxation” achieved by “separating from the mundane”. These feelings were understood by them as characteristic of immersion in a yoga practice, however, their new sharing this experience by interacting together in it, was seen as key to the emerging experience of emotional connection.

The couple appeared to struggle with differences across their experiences, and interpretations of these experiences, during the interview. G felt that the intimacy, connection, and positivity were unprecedented, novel experiences while V saw them as only more obvious, bettered versions of what existed for the couple prior to this practice. According to G, the fact that “you can’t just do your own thing next to the other person, *you have to be their other half*” meant that intimacy and connection set the practice apart from other couple activities.

The partners interacted together throughout the interview and appeared to co-create meaning in the present moment, seemingly highlighting perceived commonalities as well as discrepancies across their experiences. Both partners agreed that the partner yoga practice “brought out the best in us”, that their moods remained more positive than usual, and that arguing occurred less frequently.

**Couple #3: S&J; “We hadn’t tried anything like that before... This was our first really joint activity together”.** S and J had been together for five years and living together for three. S had attended one yoga class almost ten years prior, and neither had other prior experience in yoga. Both J and S described their experiences in concrete, individualistic, and intellectual terms (“we are quite ensconced in a fairly personal, traditional, and realistic view of day-to-day things”). They expressed feeling “terribly

skeptical” about cultural re-appropriation of yoga in the West. Both expressed the view that each is a separate and distinct individual, joined only through the context of the couple (rather than by some spiritual or other process).

The couple reported important developmental experiences, including S stating that “we start off as seeing ourselves as individuals but then we see ourselves as part of a couple”. J offered some positive reflections, referring to the couple as having “shared this experience and we learned to protect and honour each other”. It would appear that development of the couple and partners might have been related to pushing themselves to explore beyond this skepticism.

**Couple #4: S&G; “Realizing that we can just put things aside and make time for the couple”.** S and G had been together for five and half years and living together for a year and a half. S reported regularly following virtual yoga classes, and G reported infrequently doing the same, occasionally together. They had never practiced partner yoga. S&G presented to the workshops in states of conflict and disconnect. They reported significant difficulty in their connection and concurrently began couple therapy. The practice reportedly taught them that separating from these feelings was possible, and so was beginning to gradually ‘take in’ a different version of the couple. G reported that the practice was different from other activities, and initially quite difficult, “I guess because it involves another person and you have to always consider them, consider how they are feeling”. S expressed “I don’t know if we ever did a non-verbal communication before, that was interesting and new for us”.

In navigating their relational and spiritual differences, engagement with the immediate present appeared to be an important experience. The partners reported “it was

hard to connect to my body... to just be there for the experience”, and later, “I actually felt I did get there, like I was in the room, experiencing it... being able to not think for a moment so that I could connect more with my partner...”. Overall, they found themselves experiencing body awareness, focus on the practice, focus in the present moment, and awareness of their partner and their partner’s body, in a reportedly unprecedented way, attributing this to how the practice “got me out of my head”.

**Couple #5: F&M; “We worked a lot closer, as we really never look at each other that closely”.** F and M had been together for four years and living together for two. F reported regularly following virtual yoga classes, with M occasionally doing the same. The couple had never practiced partner yoga together. They stressed the importance of a quality, shared experience together, as the demands of typical daily life did not foster many of those experiences. M pointed frequently to the idea of balance, in both a literal and symbolic sense. M reported having felt able to “balance time and attention” with self and other, as well as to literally balance F, and that these experiences appeared to generalize to the relationship as a whole. F referenced “enjoyment”, “connection”, and “intimacy” accessed through feeling M’s “presence” in the immediate present. M reported experiencing a break from his dominantly cognitive experiencing style, and coming to find F beyond the confines of M’s own thoughts. About this new connection, M expressed, “I was us”.

The practice was described as “unusual” by both, in terms of the partners being actively engaged. Actively focussing together through eye contact was an important part of this. Both reported coming to access, for the first time, feelings of “connecting”, “bonding”, and “communication”, including nonverbal communication.

**Couple #6: G&M; “If both like yoga, then it is useful for the couple”.** G and M had been together for about two years and living together for a year and half. Neither partner reported any prior experience with yoga, including partner yoga. This couple spoke very little about their experiences and often contradicted themselves within a given statement or topic. G expressed that this was, and was not, a “spiritual experience”. Similarly, M expressed that the practice was both “useful” and “not useful” for the couple. Typically, few elaborations were provided. It is hypothesized that this might have been due to a significant language barrier. The couple often expressed a lack of understanding of the questions, on several occasions stating that they did not know what the researcher was talking about. They often spoke to one another throughout the interview in their native tongue.

While the experiences of this couple were challenging for the researcher to interpret, a small number of evident findings did emerge. G reported a dislike of relaxation and a sense of “bored” when not engaging directly with M. G also stated that despite this, personal relaxation did set in across the practice, experienced as a calming of the “busy mind”. G reported seeing an “improved presence” in the partners and a general improvement of the couple overall.

There were numerous expressions by M of an individualistic perspective, and a disidentification from spirituality. It was reiterated throughout the interview that M had enjoyed the practice insofar as it was “very relaxing”.

**Couple #7: K&M; “To step outside of the mundane... and to find one another again in the darkness”.** K and M had been together for about eleven years and living together for six. The couple have a three-year-old son together. K had occasionally

attended virtual yoga classes, and M reported no prior yoga experience of any kind. K and M presented with love and appreciation for one another, drowned out over the years by parenting and other life demands. When the couple was led to engage together in the practice, significant shifts occurred in both personal and relational spheres. K shared that there had been “uncomfortable” feelings and defensive laughing, with difficulty tolerating eye contact, at the beginning of the practice. This experience reportedly transformed, and the couple came to feel “definitely easier to sink into it... and it definitely felt more intimate”. K expressed a sense that “M, at some point along the study, started to place... full weight on me in the practices, whereas before that, M had held back a lot of his weight”.

M noted that this was less about the activity itself (as typical couple activities might be), and instead, “was more about connecting” and “quality time together”. M described coming to feel more connected and to be more aware of this connection, even coming to vividly sense K, and K’s relaxation, “without touching or seeing K”.

**Couple #8: L&D; “We’re not just two people coming together, we are a couple, a whole, and we are both a part of that”.** L and D had been together for about five years and living together for just over three. L attended regular yoga classes and D attended on occasion, but separately. The couple attended one in-person couple yoga workshop two months prior to the study. L & D reported coming “to do something together, to be together” and that “really felt closer and more connected”. Both reported feeling a meaningfulness through active engagement with one another and enjoying mutual interdependence. D recounted asking L for trust, assuring that they were capable of succeeding in a practice. L obliged, and the two felt a transformative moment of trust

open up, allowing for the couple to function better in subsequent tasks. D marvelled, “she did trust, then she tried, and we did it!”.

The couple’s achieving of “nonverbal communication” emerged as a key experience, and L also expressed knowing that D was present and close by, doing the same thing, in the same way, at the same time, furthering a sense of connection. Both partners reported noting awareness of their partner’s presence *inside* of themselves, and both described a sense of “attunement”, as in “I was feeling D and D’s needs”. They stated, “that’s when I really felt that spirituality in the practice, when I was, like, with D, but in me, and checking”.

They reported that the practice appeared to further, but also to simply heighten, existing couple experiences. As D expressed, “there were definitely times where I was like, oh that’s cool, I never realized that before about us, and also other times when it was just like, exactly as I know us to be and how we always are”.

**Couple #9: T&H; “Partner yoga took the theory and gave me a practical way to do it”.** T and H had been together for about 26 years and living together for five years fewer. They have three children, aged fourteen, eight, and eight years old. Both partners had attended occasional live yoga classes, but had never practiced partner yoga. Both had been immersed in psychological and Buddhist teachings, stating that “we talked about all those ideas before and listened to a million podcasts but it wasn’t happening in a practical sense”. They were at a loss about how to translate their knowledge into an experience, or a way of life.

The couple reported finding an unprecedented experience of intimacy, and transcended a “communication block”, where “I felt like we were both just ‘there’ and I

mostly didn't know what was happening around us and was just in the moment". Both partners referred to a process of working with their own minds to try to focus beyond the "distracting thoughts" to connect with the "core"—understood by the couple, according to Buddhist philosophy, as 'the real self within'. This process was seen as facilitative for the couple, as in H's statement that "I felt a little more aware of us as I can be very much in my head... and don't express myself necessarily... and was finding that it was more than just me, very much *us* that whole time...". The couple also came to share in a meaningful way, "to find that commonality" and interact in a truly "authentic" manner together.

**Couple #10: M&R; "I felt I was really able to connect... in a way that was different from what we normally do".** M and R had been together for five years and living together for four. M had attended weekly yoga classes until approximately two years prior, and the couple had attended regular partner *acro yoga* classes in that same timeframe. The couple described the practice as an atypical couple bonding activity, with R reporting feeling a meaningful sense of "investing in the relationship" through focussing upon one another in the immediate present. R also reported that, unlike in other activities, "everything sort of melted away", referring to an experience of being very focused in the immediate present. M spoke about how "I felt I was really able to connect with R in a way that is different from what we normally do. I feel I really got to know what R is like... something about just being together".

M reported experiencing a newfound "reassuring" of anxious feelings through the perceived "presence and caring" of R. Both partners referenced feelings of intimacy and nonverbal, attuned communication in the practice. M stated that the practice "didn't

necessarily improve the relationship, but it reinforced it... that you don't really have the opportunity to do this stuff, or even to see how much R really cares, in daily life".

Overall, "working well" appeared to be an important experience for the couple, with M reporting having experienced R as "attentive and caring" in this way, and R finding both challenge and growth in having to learn to work out difficult postures together.

**Couple #11: C&B; "I felt a feeling of closeness, a feeling of joy".** C and B had been together for nine years and living together for four. They had attended weekly yoga classes separately and practiced partner *acro yoga* some time ago. This couple had recently begun to heal from a reportedly difficult period with much disconnect between the partners. The practice reconnected the couple through "couple bonding" and "basic couple time" which was "really important to me". C verbalized this felt shift in couple dynamics as "incorporating B back into my identity".

Both partners found connecting to self firstly was important to becoming able to connect in the couple. They also discussed "balance", referring to coming to develop both the literal, bodily balancing and counterbalancing of weight in the practice, and the figurative 'balancing' of functioning well together in typical couple life. C remarked that the couple had been placed back into contact with "the sweet kinds of things" and "being able to touch... there is something about physical touch that we had avoided".

Both partners noted presence and devotion in their partner. When discussing a found feeling of "closeness and joy", B reported accessing a similar feeling to that of infatuation, otherwise present only at the beginning of their relationship.

**Summary and conclusion of overview.** Each participant couple in this study shared a unique story and distinct set of lived experiences. It is apparent that these sets of

lived experiences also converge and meaningfully diverge. IPA holds as its philosophy that individual lived experiences are significant, and that their interpretative synthesis can hint at universal truths existing beyond these experiences alone (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). All couples expressed that partner yoga practice was a different connection experience than in other shared activities in couple life, and each of the couples also reported important improvements in the couple, appearing to have taken place across the practice. The emerging themes in participant reports are presented below.

### **Part Two: Partner Yoga as A Novel Connection Experience**

**Research question #1: What are couples' overall experiences of partner yoga and what meaning is made of these experiences?** All participant couples reported feeling that the partner yoga practice was beneficial for their couple. All participant couples also expressed a sense that partner yoga was experienced as different than any other couple activity. Nine among the eleven couples (#1, #2, #3, #4, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) explicitly expressed that there was a new "connection" experience that had never been encountered before. The remaining two couples (#5, #6) also stressed that this was a novel and beneficial experience for the couple, even if they did not explicitly refer to it as a *novel connection experience*. None of the couples precisely named that connection experience, although impressions were shared of what that experience might be. All of the couples portrayed this experience as "new" or "different". Most (#1, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) also said that it was meaningful "quality time" together which was out of the norm. A few couples (#1, #7, #11) used the phrase "actively connecting" when referring to the nature of these connection experiences, one couple (#2) used the words

“one hundred percent present”, and one couple (#9) used the precise phrase “actively engaged”. The couples that did not explicitly use these words still appeared to describe their connection experiences similarly to those who did; overall, all of the couples reported a novel, meaningful connection experience as they participated in the partner yoga practice.

It would appear that the couples’ descriptions of the novel connection experience can be sub-divided into three component sub-themes: *Actively Engaging*, *Interdependently Collaborating*, and *Integrating Whole Self*. See table 5.1 for these sub-themes and the participant statements which comprise them. A detailed description of the sub-themes and statements follow thereafter.

Table 5.1: Themes and sub-themes in couples’ novel connection experiences.

<b>Emergent Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Participant Statements</b>
<b>Novel connection experience</b>	Actively Engaging	Focus in the present moment together Focus on the practice together Becoming present with partner through first being present within own self Enjoying the experience of the practice Always knowing where limits were Coming to feel responsible for own wellness Being held in structure of the activity Experiential intensity
	Interdependently Collaborating	Joint practices as more immersive and fun than parallel practices Acting in coordinated way Feeling attuned with partner Working together on a joint project as one Facing a challenge together as one Aware of internalized sense of partner

		Experiencing more as the couple than individually
	Integrating Whole Self	Feeling connected physically Feeling connected spiritually Feeling connected emotionally Feeling connected mentally Feeling connected sexually Body-based experience Intimate experience Transcending the confines of cognitive dominance Authentic relating through core self

***Novel connection experience through actively engaging.*** The couples described partner yoga as a couple activity requiring *presence*. In all of the couples, the reported degree of engagement with oneself, one’s partner, and the practice *in the immediate present* contrasted highly with reported perceptions of the couples’ engagement in typical, “mundane” (#7) couple life. In couples #1, #3, #4, #5, and #7, it was stated that *the practice itself was the effect*. Couple #1 stated: “just having that practice together and realizing the effect that we have on each other, that was an effect in and of itself...”.

All of the couples reported an important, novel experience of *active engagement with one another* in the immediate present, where they spoke about coming to focus deeply and directly upon one another. Many of the couples (#1, #2, #4, #5, #7, #8, #9) spoke about coming to be able to sense the other from within themselves, such as when the practice directed them to explore feeling their partners without using sight or touch. Couple #7, described a moment of coming to sense the other partner so strongly that they felt what the other was feeling—they reported believing to have come to feel, within themselves, their partner’s relaxation. Couple #9, too, recounted a similar experience,

stating that “I was hyper aware of T”. Couple #1 similarly expressed “always knowing where the limits are” within the couple, in reference to negotiating the joint practices together, and finding a sense of omnipresent *knowing*.

Many couples (#2, #4, #5, #7, #9, #10, #11) reported an emerging need within the practice to attempt to balance active engagement with self, versus active engagement with other. Several (#2, #3, #4, #7, #9, #11) couples reported concluding that connecting with self firstly is crucial to then being able to connect with other in these novel connections of the practice. Conversely, some other couples (#1, #6, #8) reported a novel connection experience in which they felt consistently, simultaneously connected to both self and other. For them, these active engagement experiences did not appear to compete.

All of the couples reported an important, novel experience of *active engagement with the practice* in the immediate present. Some couples (#4, #5, #7, #10, #11) spoke about awareness of being held by the ‘structure’ inherent in the instructor-led, four-week couple-based workshop series that was reportedly perceived as requiring not only a commitment, but also a personal presence. Couple #4 and couple #5 both spoke frequently about this, reporting a felt connection with the *practice* itself, and through this, finding an unprecedented connection within the *couple*, and their mutual devotion.

The couples (#2, #4, #5, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) who reported an important, novel experience of *active engagement with self* in the immediate present tended to also report that this was a welcomed break from feeling busy, stressed, or pressured in daily life. One couple (#7) appeared to particularly embody this sentiment, reporting not having taken any time to connect, especially not together, since before their toddler’s birth. M conveyed this active engagement with self as: “it was almost like we were

rediscovering—like we forgot who we were, or part of who we were, because we had to chip that off for our son for three years, and now the fuzzy glasses are coming off a little bit, and we are coming back to ourselves”.

Similarly, in couple #3, both partners described how they had been occupied with various aspects of their lives, and that engagement in the practice reconnected them with their personal awareness of, and commitment to, wellness. J stated that the practice “changed me from being very passive to being active... thus making me more healthy...”. Both partners also reported experiencing “mental health” benefits. J referred several times to the “mental aspect” of the partner yoga experience, while S pointed to “the aspects of meditation and how it could help me with my mental health”. S also mentioned that immersing in the practice appeared to lessen typical feelings of anxiety, and that practicing in an ongoing way would be helpful for feeling better.

In sum, participant couples’ active engagement was a major theme among their reports of lived connection experiences. Their active engagement tended to be felt in various ways, including immersion in the couple, in the practice, and in themselves, within the immediate present. Other specific experiences of active engagement included a sense of connection to their own wellness and a feeling of experiential intensity. This active engagement was one of three sub-themes discerned within the accounts of a “novel connection experience” had by the partners in the partner yoga practice.

*Novel connection experience through interdependently collaborating.* All couples spoke frequently and in-depth about an aspect of the novel connection experience which couple #1 came to deem “interdependent” and “collaboration”. The couples reported that this was an important and unprecedented element of experience which led

them to feel closer and more connected to one another.

Many couples (#1, #2, #3, #4, #7, #8) reported coming to *feel* “attuned” or “in tuned”, feeling “in sync” or noticing “synchronization” (#3, #4, #8), “symbiotic” (#7), and watching the couple become “coordinated” (#1, #2). Other couples stressed a task-focused perspective of coming to work well together, to join as a capable, functional team (#5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11). All couples addressed this aspect of coming to be together in a new way through the joint interdependent collaborating.

The couples all reported that joining together to work on a shared project, including facing and overcoming challenges together, and weathering various other parts of the process together, was an important experience. They reported that the couple had to join together in a new way that was different—more interconnected—than what occurred in other activities. Many couples described differences they perceived between experiences of partner yoga and other couple activities, such as rock climbing (#1), jogging together (#2), sailing (#4), mountain biking (#8), and soccer (#10). Some couples (#3, #5, #10) also reported that “this was our first really joint activity together” (#3), or else it was the first in a very long time (#7, #9, #11). In all of these cases the partners felt joined and mutually dependent together in an unprecedented way, and this appeared to equate to a novel experience of mutual closeness and connection.

One instance of this interdependent collaboration which was common to all of the couples appeared to occur during practices requiring both partners to balance their weight together. Couples #1, #2, and #3 spoke about the partner tree pose in particular, expressing awareness of each partner working to balance themselves, while also serving to balance and counter-balance the other. Couple #2 explained, “... you have to be aware

of the other person's core and how they're moving, and you have to balance another half... I couldn't do by myself what we did together. They elaborated that while the "base of the pose is on you", the posture goes far beyond simply balancing one's self because it was the couple, with both partners, acting, and not simply the individuals doing so. Among the couples who did not specifically mention the partner tree pose, almost all (#4, #5, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) still spoke about "balancing together" in these interdependently collaborating ways, such as in couple #10, needing to "be aware of each other's bodies", to "work on nonverbal or verbal communication to learn that when one goes like this, the other has to go like this".

Many couples (#1, #3, #4, #5, #6, #8, #10, #11) specifically mentioned an impression that time appeared to flow better or faster in these joint postures, that they never felt "bored" or that the practice was "too slow" when together, as they could when in parallel. Couples all reported finding more enjoyment or "fun" in the joint practices as compared to the parallel ones. Couple #3 stated that "we experienced this more as a couple than individually".

In sum, the phrase "interdependent collaboration" was coined by participant couple #1. It refers to couple connection experiences in the practice where the partners immerse in their mutual dependency, such as in joint balancing poses, and encounter this interdependence saliently. The mutual dependence allows partners to connect deeply and to successfully co-create a joint outcome. The phrase "interdependent collaboration" is one of the three sub-themes identified within the reported novel connection experiences of the participant couples within the partner yoga practice.

*Novel connection experience through integrating whole self.* All of the couples

were interested in and discussed the aspects of themselves felt engaged by the practice and the connection experience. Even in the absence of an interview question seeking this information, all of the couples came to share their impressions, each having explored the question for themselves. This question appeared to have importance for the couples. There was no apparent consensus on any one single way that this connection was felt exclusively, although all of the couples did report perceiving a body-based experience. Several different parts of self were named by each couple, appearing to be activated simultaneously in the novel connection experience.

All of the couples described feeling physically connected to their partners and their partners' bodies, such as through eye contact, touch, and perceived interdependence. Ten (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) of the couples also reported feeling connected through some emotionality, such as in feeling "reassurance" (#5), feeling "commitment" (#3, #11), feeling "comforted" (#10), and feeling "encouragement" (#3, #5, #7, #8).

Every couple had responded to a question about their experience of spirituality in the practice, the responses to which are detailed in the next section of results. Beyond this question, four couples (#1, #7, #9, #11) came forward with the sense that the connection they experienced felt like it was spiritually-based. Four couples (#3, #4, #5, #11) mentioned perceived mental aspects within the connection experience, and one couple (#11) mentioned that this connection experience felt "metaphysical", elaborating with, "you can focus on your partner being there, you know, that *presence*" (#11).

Three couples (#3, #7, #9) specifically discussed a kind of non-sexual, affectionate connection experience as in touch "that did not feel sexual in nature" (#3) but felt more "instrumental" (#3). Two couples (#7, #8) reported feeling connected sexually, and one

couple (#9) specifically expressed a feeling that the connecting felt “intimate” beyond sexuality, reportedly becoming aware of this during the practices of sitting facing one another with hands and knees touching, and also when touching foreheads together (#9). Other couples (#2, #3, #5, #7, #8, #9, #11) simply mentioned “intimacy” or “intimate” as a basis within themselves for these connection experiences. Still one other couple (#9) described the connecting as mutually “authentic”, stating, “it was very authentic... yeah very authentic, my authentic self and your authentic self without our overall level of worry... distractions... get to the core underneath and try to express the core... who am I and who are we now?”.

Most couples (#1, #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) reported accessing, for what felt like the first time, a dampening of some reportedly dominant cognitive experience, often critical in nature. This reportedly allowed the couples to connect together beyond the confines of these cognitive processes, otherwise seen as restricting access to meaningful connection with self and other. Couple #6 reported an impression that both relaxing to a new extent, and finding deeper connection to other, were seemingly made possible by the “calming of the mind” experienced in the practice. Similarly, couple #4 reported that when there was less “thinking and stuff going on in my mind” they found themselves able to be truly present with their partner such that “*I was us*”.

In sum, although there was no one specific aspect of self in which this novel connection experience was exclusively anchored, it is noted that the couples did report experiencing the practice as body-based, with physical and emotional aspects (for almost all--#6 did not specifically report seeing emotional involvement during the practice), and transcending of the limitations of dominant cognitive process. Most (#1, #3, #4, #5, #7,

#9, #11) also described feeling this experience in at least one other aspect of self, and the terms “intimate” and “authentic” used in these ways appear to be signalling some “core” (#9) or true, genuine, whole-self experience. It would appear that, for these participants, these connections actually span, or integrate, these several aspects of self.

*Novel connection experience conclusions.* It has been seen thus far that (1) participant couples all reported a novel connection experience within the partner yoga practice, and (2) that a. actively engaging, b. interdependently collaborating, and c. integrating whole self appear to be key themes pertaining to this novel connection experience. It could be that these three subthemes are critical components of the novel connection experience accessed by these couples in the partner yoga practice.

### **Part Three: Partner Yoga as an Experience of Attachment, Couple Functioning, Self-Expansiveness, and Spirituality**

Partner yoga for couples is not well-known or understood, and this basic research had sought to draw upon concepts emerging from the existing empirical literature on the similar topic of mindfulness for couples in order to uncover a range of participant experiences therein. The concepts used were attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality. For each of these concepts, the researcher first asked participant couples what the term meant to them, to allow the researcher to become aware of their personal frameworks. Next the researcher shared the literature’s perspective on this same concept so that both sets of frameworks could become shared. The participants were then asked what their experiences were, for each of these concepts, within the partner yoga practice. The responses to each of these questions are understood as representing parts of the couples’ overall experiences in the practice. Detailed

explorations of their reports follow below.

**Research Question #2: What are couples' specific experiences of attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality within the partner yoga practice?**

*What are couples' experiences of attachment in partner yoga?* The couples all responded to a question about their experiences of attachment in partner yoga. Used in this way, attachment refers to subjective experiences of couple attachment processes, which are described in the literature under attachment theory, mostly measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Wei, et. al., 2007). All couples were at least somewhat aware of attachment theory at the time when this question was first posed, and were able to provide some at least partial answer as to what attachment could mean.

When asked about how attachment was experienced within the partner yoga practice, participants tended to provide complex answers naming multiple elements of experience, often including perceived causal relationships between them. There appeared to be a high degree of convergence in these participant responses. The participant responses appeared to center around a reported experience of *trust*, with almost all couples (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #10, #11) reporting on this. This trust was apparently related to the partners' physically relying and depending upon one another to be held up, which was required of them by the practice. Some couples also expressed feeling their partner's support or seeing themselves as supportive of their partner (#3, #4, #5, #8). Many couples (#1, #5, #8, #10) expressed knowing that "I will not get hurt" or "I will not fall" and "I will be safe" because of this perceived ability to rely upon and be supported. This appeared to apply even, or especially, where there was a perception of the practice

as “difficult” or “risky”. Overall, the couples (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #10) specified that trust occurred within an experience of dependence, or of heightened needs.

Two other commonly reported elements of experience were a sense of communicating well, often nonverbally, in negotiating the challenging movement and balance of the two bodies (#3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #10, #11), and a sense of closeness and comfort accessed through the newfound experience of trust (#1, #2, #5, #7, #11). Couple #7 also referred to this closeness and comfort as “intimacy”, and “becoming symbiotic by the end”. Some couples (#3, #4, #7, #8, #11) emphasized perceived accomplishments and effectively working together more than, or else along with, the felt closeness and comfort. Many (#1, #3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #10) specifically described an experience of coming to *feel*, or attune to, the needs and states of one another, and accommodating those. For these couples, the mutual meeting of needs appeared to coincide with a wide range of experiences in *working well* together and *feeling well* together.

Couples reported coming to access an experience of couple unity, with novel, unprecedented feelings of togetherness and connection. Couple #2 described a “confirmation of attunement” and newfound ability to “really be together, which is different than going through the motions”. Couple #3 described the couple as a united front against the difficult practice. Couple #11 described “having found one another again” and coming to feel something that resembled the infatuation from the beginning of the relationship, but was *more than*. Couple #11 also described an experience of discovering excitement through touching, where the touch felt reportedly so pleasurable, that “I really felt excited and could not stop touching B and reaching out for B”. Couple #7, too, expressed that, across the practice, the couple came to lean physically and

spiritually on one another, an experience seen by them as allowing access to attunement, sensing one another's "states and capacities", and ultimately, a "symbiosis".

The two couples that provided reports of experience which were not consistent with the other couples' reports above were couples #6 and #9. For couple #6, in response to the question about their attachment experiences in partner yoga, the couple responded, "I think it was the same all the time, I do not think there were any changes", and "I think we are the same in our day-to-day life". When asked to describe how they see themselves in their day-to-day life, the couple reported not understanding the question, and offered that they did not know what their attachment styles were. This was a place where communication with this couple appeared to break down, and no specific answer to this question was obtained. It might have been informative to understand what was meant by their experiences being the same with no change, especially because this might represent a divergence from the other couples' reports of novel experiences in the practice, however that information remains unknown. Couple #9 responded to the question about attachment experiences in partner yoga by stating that:

"... really helped me to express some intimacy needs I have in a more appropriate way, or more diverse way", "I think it was a practical way because we talked about all those ideas before and listened to a million podcasts but it wasn't happening in a practical sense but it..." "...took the theory and gave me a practical way to do that".

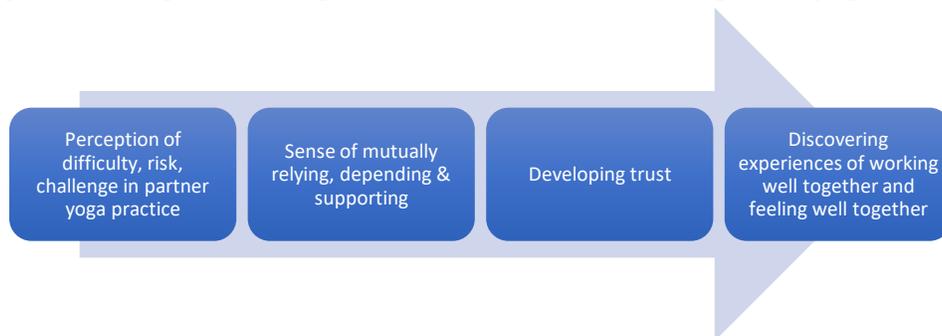
These new intimacy needs had been explained as closeness outside of sexuality. At the time of the interview the couple reported continuing to access those deep, unprecedented intimacy experiences, now within their own emerging partner yoga practice at home.

These reports are not seen as specifically divergent from the other reports of attachment experiences. The deep intimacy reported here could parallel the closeness and comfort

reported by the other couples. It remains unclear whether this couple’s description of intimacy experiences is seen by them as directly linked to attachment in partner yoga, or whether they were simply continuing their conversation from just prior to this question.

In sum, almost all of the couples reported a series of experiences that to them, felt like they represented the experience of attachment in partner yoga. The central element in this experience appeared to be trust, linked to the mutual reliance, dependence, and support forced by the physically-based, challenging and ‘risky’ new practice experience. Through this process, the couples reportedly came to encounter new experiences in working well together and feeling well together. This sequence is understood as an experiential phenomenon occurring within one aspect—the attachment experiences—of the partner yoga practice. This reported sequence is depicted below in figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Sequence of experiences in attachment within partner yoga for couples.



***What are couples’ experiences of couple functioning in partner yoga?*** All of the couples responded to a question about their experiences of couple functioning in partner yoga. The concept of dyadic adjustment, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), had emerged in a review of empirical literature for this present research. Dyadic adjustment is said to be a high-level, trans-theoretical concept encompassing a

range of couple functioning experiences (Spanier, 1976). It was expected that the more colloquial wording “couple functioning” might resonate with the couples more than would the empirical term “dyadic adjustment”. It is for this reason that the translated version, “couple functioning”, was used.

Few couples reported requiring elaboration on the concept before speaking to their experiences of it. Where this was the case, the couples were all able to confirm a personal sense of the concept once it was explained. They were told that couple functioning referred to how well the couple is meeting demands and pressures, and at the same time, what their experiences are of one another and of the couple while they are going through life in this way. Interested couples were also told the dyadic adjustment sub-themes (i.e.: couple consensus, couple cohesion, dyadic satisfaction, and affectional expression). No couples reported having further questions after this conversation.

In terms of experiences of couple functioning in partner yoga, each couple seemed to report a distinct experience. The themes of active engagement (#1, #2, #4, #5, #8 #9) interdependent collaboration (#1, #6, #7, #10), and whole-self (#2, #4, #7, #8) also emerged. Taken together, the reports of couple functioning experiences could be seen as converging around a vague category of personal and relational development experiences. These distinct experiences were presented by the couples as linked to their unique challenges in their day-to-day couple lives. No significant convergences are apparent in the content of these reported challenges. It would appear that couple functioning itself might not constitute a cohesive experience within partner yoga. Consistencies across these reports have to do instead with the incidence of personal and couple growth and development. See table 5.2 summarizing participant responses pertaining to their couple

functioning experiences, below.

Table 5.2: Summary of experiences of couple functioning in partner yoga.

<b>Couple</b>	<b>Reported growth and development experiences within couple functioning in partner yoga</b>
#1; A&M	Being able to work interdependently together, and be productive, finding connection to self and other, new degree of mutuality and reciprocity, reinforced strength as a couple, reassured ability to “be good as a couple”, and confirmation of ability to both be present, and have fun
#2; V&G	Active engagement with immediate present, and with one another, beyond mundane pressures and conflicts; experience of ‘relaxed’ together through joining individual practices and benefits thereof
#3; S&J	Mutually upholding ‘standards’ for self and partner, despite initial scepticism, coming to feel less anxious about upcoming week and feeling more accomplished during the weekend despite having less time
#4; S&G	Exchanges of help and support, active engagement in immediate present, and practice, together; separating from couple conflicts, enjoying a positive experience together in the absence of typical mutual criticism
#5; F&M	Heightened awareness of expectations for self and other, enjoying a “good, fun, bonding experience”
#6; G&M	Working together similarly as in couple life, i.e.: negotiating first to join together and work out a plan, then acting together
#7; K&M	Calming of internal critic, coming to feel more present with partner, shifting from typical self-focus to focus on partner and couple
#8; L&D	Experience of attunement, nonverbally knowing other’s needs and accommodating these, coming to focus on couple without undue expectations imposed, active engagement in practice and couple, gradually building trust, couple coming to base itself on these accumulating experiences to guide itself intrinsically
#9; T&H	Feeling trust in and reliance on partner, ‘ <i>really</i> connecting’, communicating well, active engagement in immediate present
#10; M&R	Interdependence in couple balancing, perceiving both challenge and growth in difficulty, seeing couple succeed well, feeling caring and attention from partner
#11; C&B	Working well together, sharing control, finding separation from external pressures, finding couple’s own agency, intrinsic self-direction

*What are couples' experiences of self-expansiveness in partner yoga?* All of the couples responded to an interview question about their experiences of self-expansiveness within the partner yoga practice. Self-expansiveness is a concept in transpersonal psychology, measured by the Self-Expansiveness Level Form (Friedman, 1983). Self-expansiveness is an established measure of transpersonal development, such that the more developmentally advanced the individual in the transpersonal sense, the more self-expansive, and less self-contracted, the measure would be expected to find them. The participants were informed that self-expansiveness refers to the nature and scope of an individual's identity, meaning what is identified with. Some examples were given, such as one's self-identification with their minds, their bodies, a range of close others, or with everything, and fixed in time and space versus transcending time and space.

Participant responses to the question of self-expansiveness experiences in partner yoga can be organized into two divergent groups: (1) perceived togetherness, and (2) perceived separateness. Almost all of the couples (#1, #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11) reported experiencing strong feelings of togetherness, unity, and oneness. Those perceiving togetherness appeared to equate self-expansiveness with a sense of the couple as a distinct *unit*—a *whole*—and came to experience themselves as a part of this whole. The couples did not report skepticism or resistance to these ideas, rather, they often distinctly reported an open-mindedness and a prior seeking of them.

These couples tended to describe a sense that the unit, formed by its partners joining together, felt distinct from the other surrounding couple units in the practice room. Couple #6 (partner G) stated that they had begun the practice feeling typically separate, but then had shifted and came to feel more together, united. They also cited an

“important”, “spiritual” experience of making deep eye contact, which they presented as key to the unfolding experience of unity. Couple #8 described this experience as knowing “my partner is always a part of me; even when I am actively focusing on myself, my partner is always present”. Couple #11 described their self-expansiveness experience as “feeling myself open up quite easily, spiritually, and feeling a willingness to change and open and have a more expanded focus beyond only myself”. The themes emerging from overall participant experiences, active engagement (#2, #5, #7, #8, #10, #11), interdependent collaboration (#4, #6), and whole-self (#5, #6, #8, #9) also emerged in couple participant responses within this group.

Conversely, the couple that perceived separateness (#3) did not come to speak of an experience of couple unity or oneness, and did not report viewing or experiencing the couple as a distinct whole. They did report skepticism about these ideas and concepts, and tended to describe generally individualistic perspectives that were longstanding and values- or identity-based. Partner M of couple #6 also shared statements that would seem to fit into this category, expressing that the concept of self-expansiveness did not seem to resonate, and that the practice was experienced as “just physical”. This partner further explained that they saw themselves as switching back and forth between focus on self or other exclusively, and that even these processes were seen as fully separate. In couple #4, partner G did express feeling aware of the partnership, of their own body, of their partner and their partner’s body, and of breathing and relaxation across the practice, but they also reported understanding these experiences through the lens of separateness. They reported not typically feeling “fundamentally connected” to their partner.

In sum, it would appear that there is a potential for couples to arrive at what feels to

them like self-expansiveness experiences in partner yoga. However, participant reports also suggest that one's own lack of cognitive or ideological openness to these experiences could pose an important potential obstacle.

*What are couples' experiences of spirituality in partner yoga?* All of the couples responded to an interview question about their experience of spirituality within the partner yoga practice. Spirituality was defined, for the purposes of this study, in the personal sense, where each participant's own internalizations and personal lived experiences would determine what spirituality was. The researcher did not share any specific literature definitions of the concept. While some couples reported not identifying with this concept, as in, "I am not spiritual", all couples did express a personal sense of what spirituality is or is not, to them.

Participant reports of spirituality experiences in the partner yoga practice can be sub-divided into three categories: (1) spirituality through active engagement, (2) active engagement without perceived spirituality, and (3) spirituality not at all resonating as part of experience. The couples that perceived a spiritual experience in the partner yoga practice (#1, #2, #4, #5, #6, #8, #9, #10, #11) also reported that this was felt most saliently through the various forms of active engagement they experienced, including active focus together in the immediate present, on self, on partner, on the whole couple, and on the practice. Each couple appeared to have their specific points of focus within these spiritual, active engagement experiences. Couple #1 expressed that actively connecting constituted a spiritual experience. Couple #2 referred to a focus in the immediate present, already expected from yoga, but now in a new form, together. Couple #4 saw spirituality as being rooted in growing awareness of breathing and of their own

bodies which also reportedly seemed to keep them from “thinking too much” and thus feeling disconnected. Couple #5 mentioned that spirituality occurred in the breathing and relaxing, as well as through presence in the practice and groundedness in the couple, and also the enjoyment of these experiences. Couple #6 said that the chanting was calming and the relaxation was enjoyable, ridding them of stress, while couple #8 reported that the deep experiences of connection, feeling partner within oneself, feeling attuned, and feeling resonance in simultaneously shared experiences were key elements in the spiritual experience. Couple #9 mentioned verbal exchanges which engaged them actively in sharing and processing together, coming to enjoy deepening intimacy. Couple #10 reported a spiritual feeling beyond what could be verbalized, as well as appreciation for and enjoyment of shared relaxation and connection, especially through their whole-selves in a body-based way. Finally, couple #11 reported a spiritual experience through active engagement in uplifting feelings, “releasing into the practice”, feeling benefits to self and couple, and feeling hopeful about couple growth and healing. These findings suggest that a spiritual couple experience can be accessed through various forms of active engagement of partner yoga.

Five of the couples described similar experiences, however they reported no perceived spiritual meaning in them—that the ‘spirituality’ concept did not resonate. Couple #7 shared an impression that they never have, and never would, see themselves as connecting spirituality, that this is not relevant to them, and that these connecting experiences in the partner yoga practice felt to them more like ‘emotional connecting’ instead. In couple #10, partner R reported the same but deemed the practice “physically-based” and the connection experiences therein as “physically connecting”. Similarly, in

couple #4, partner G reported not identifying with the spirituality concept itself, however coming to feel more connected to self and own body in the practice. In couple #3, partner S reported actively trying to separate from the known spiritual and religious roots of the yoga practice, however experiencing important engagement with their own personal development and wellbeing through perceived improvements in mental health and calming of typical anxious feelings. And in couple #11, partner B reported coming to feel more grounded and connected with self and the couple, however personally not identifying with the concept of ‘spirituality’.

The final category of responses to spiritual experiences in partner yoga practice were those who asserted a personal distancing and dis-identification from spirituality, who offered nothing more about these experiences and how else they might have interpreted them instead. These included couple #3, partner J who expressed perceived conflicts between his moralism and aspects of the practice, including potential “re-appropriation”. This also included couple #6, partner G who reported coming to re-question their own view of spirituality at that present time.

In sum, most participants reported having spiritual experiences with their partner within the partner yoga practice, and these couples were able to pinpoint and describe those experiences. Participant reports are suggestive of a phenomenon in which couple experiences perceived as spiritual can be accessed through various active engagement processes, and that these experiences were accessed by many in partner yoga. Another smaller group of couples described similar types of experiences, but did not identify these as spiritual, instead interpreting them as non-spiritual. Finally, two couple partners simply disidentified from any and all spiritual experiences in the partner yoga practice.

Overall it appears that spirituality can be accessed, and lived in a positive manner, in the partner yoga practice. It also appears though that one's openness to experience and personal interpretative frameworks are more pertinent to the actual lived experiences, than would be the objective practices themselves.

*Summary of emerging themes within exploratory concepts.* It has been seen thus far that, among the explorations of attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality, the findings related to attachment experiences in the practice were most extensive, and most highly convergent. Based on these reports, it would appear that partner yoga can be lived as challenging, difficult, and 'risky', and can stir mutual experiences of reliance, dependence and support, with attunement and nonverbal communication, in attempts to navigate these effectively as a team. These processes tended to be seen by participants as engendering a salient experience of trust, the active experiencing of which tended to give way to various newfound instances of working well together and feeling well together.

The experiences of couple functioning within partner yoga appeared to be less cohesive and more individualized across the couples. It appeared that whatever the couple had been facing in their personal and interpersonal growth and development processes was transferred into the practicing experience, and further experienced through that iteration. The couples reported experiences of personal and relational development, each according to their own frameworks of what was meaningful to them personally at that time. The development experiences themselves were therefore understood as experiential phenomena common to all participant couples.

Self-expansiveness and spirituality were either experienced, or not experienced,

with the participants split between groups. For spirituality, there was also a third group, whose experiences were similar, but interpreted as something other than spiritual. For both self-expansiveness and spirituality, it would seem that one's own openness to these experiences was crucial to the advent of living them as such.

The themes of active engagement, interdependent collaboration, and whole-self integration, which had emerged from the participant's accounts of general experience in the practice, had also emerged in these participant accounts of specific experiences. These themes together had become understood as constituting the *novel connection experience* phenomenon central to these findings. It would appear that these core phenomena found in the overall partner yoga experiences can also be discerned within specific parts of those experiences. Therefore, there is consistency in these core findings across these different levels of experiences.

#### **Part Four: Meaning of the Partner Yoga Practice**

Because of the newness of empirical research in partner yoga and the vagueness of the construct within the empirical literature, part of this research interview sought to find out what the participants thought partner yoga to be, and what that could mean for practicing couples. The participants' responses to these questions are explored below.

**Research Question #3: What can therefore be understood of the partner yoga experience as it occurs within the couple context? *What is partner yoga, and what can partner yoga mean for couples?*** All couples responded to both of these questions however there did not appear to be any clear differences between the types of statements and information brought forward in the two sets of responses. It was noted also that one couple (#7) specifically stated that their response would be the same for both questions.

For the purposes of this data analysis, the two sets of responses were taken together.

Several themes emerged as common to all or most participant responses, and at the same time, each individual couple also offered unique perspectives. Couple #1 referred to partner yoga as “team building”, a “trust exercise”. They cited their experience of interdependence, as they pointed to a need to know one’s own limitations and to respect them, “attuning yourself to yourself”, in order to keep the other partner safe within the practice. Couple #2 described beginning to “grow apart” but finding active engagement in the practice together, and then perceiving couple healing and growth. Couple #3 conveyed that working together and connecting physically and emotionally felt like key elements driving the developmental motion toward “coming to see yourself as part of a couple unit, rather than simply an individual”. Couple #4 described the practice as “a different type of couple therapy” in which couple issues are heightened and can be worked on, and also a developmental process occurs in which the ends and means are unclear. The couple felt that devotion, to the practice and to one another, is how this growth and change appears to take shape. Couple #5 learned how to communicate nonverbally, “putting baggage aside and truly noticing”, in a way that is atypical of the rest of their relationship. They also reported coming to balance time and attention between self and other, an important striving in their couple life. Couple #6 did not speak much about their impressions of partner yoga, other than to say that it is an “opportunity for relationship improvement through relaxing the mind” perhaps even changing ways of thinking and becoming more present with partner. Couple #7 saw partner yoga as “a way to build connection between partners through structured activity” though gradual, cumulative benefits supporting both overall wellness and specific problems. They



<b>attunement, intimacy</b>											
<b>Nonverbal &amp; verbal communication</b>	O	O		O	O			O	O	O	O
<b>Self-growth &amp; awareness</b>	O	O	O	O		O	O		O	O	O
<b>Couple growth &amp; awareness</b>	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
<b>Connect beyond the mundane</b>		O		O	O		O	O	O	O	O
<b>Transference of process &amp; dynamics to + from daily life</b>	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
<b>Learning to work well together</b>	O	O	O	O	O			O	O	O	O
<b>Mutual accommodating</b>	O	O			O		O	O	O	O	O
<b>Quality time</b>	O	O	O		O	O		O	O	O	
<b>Therapeutic benefit</b>	O	O		O	O		O		O	O	

The participants described varied perspectives on what partner yoga is and what it can mean for couples. Once again it can be seen that the themes of active engagement, interdependent collaboration, and whole-self integration are strongly emerging from participant reports. This is to be expected, given that participants continue to communicate salient experiences of novel connection, and that these themes were found to be aspects of that novel connection experience. This would appear to mean that there is consistency between what the participants say they have experienced, and what they say the practice, or experience, actually is for them. Other themes named by almost all of

the couples were: nonverbal & verbal communication, self-growth and self-awareness, connecting beyond the mundane, learning to work well together, mutual accommodating, quality time, and therapeutic benefit.

With this high rate of convergence across the responses about what partner yoga is and what it can do, it is possible to synthesize a comprehensive answer about what partner yoga is, while still capturing the lived experiences of the individual couples. Accordingly, partner yoga would appear to be:

*an opportunity for couple partners to connect wholly and actively together, to collaboratively create as one, while symbolically working through their difficulties, and coming to grow and develop. It would appear to bring couple partners into their holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) and integrative, body-based experiences, and require that they communicate both verbally and nonverbally in order to come to attune to one another, sense one another's needs and states, and mutually accommodate these. It would appear to provide the structure through which couples can learn to work well together and also accumulate experiences of feeling well together. Partner yoga can be lived as both a therapeutic experience and a wellness, or growth and development, experience.*

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

#### **Review and Interpretation of Findings**

This research was designed to elucidate what partner yoga is, and how it is experienced by practicing couples. There was little existing empirical literature on partner yoga at the time of this study, and even less of this was regarding partner yoga practice by couples. Very few studies had sought to bring attention to subjective lived

experiences, and participant perspectives had remained relatively undocumented. This research sought to engage with participants using interpretative phenomenological analysis to make sense of both idiosyncratic and phenomenological nuances across the reports of experience. Research questions guided explorations of: (1) how the partner yoga practice was experienced by couples and what meaning they made of these experiences; (2) how each attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality were experienced by couples; and (3) what partner yoga is and can do for couples.

**Partner yoga for couples as a novel connection experience.** The main finding was that partner yoga can immerse practicing couples in a particular experience of connection, reported as novel and unprecedented. When couple partners had the experience of being (1) actively engaged together, (2) in a body-based way using their whole selves including emotional, mental, spiritual, sexual and other aspects, and (3) were interdependently collaborating through relying on each other to co-create something that neither could on their own, then the novel couple connection was attained. All eleven of the couples reported never having had this novel couple connection experience before participating in the study. The findings were highly converging, with all couples reporting this novel connection experience and its emerging themes.

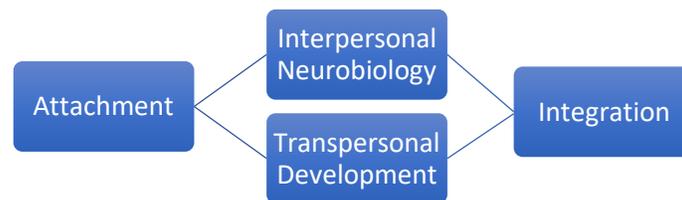
This novel connection experience in partner yoga did not come to be precisely named by the participants, only somewhat described and vaguely referenced. They did not appear to know of precise language to name the experience, and they sometimes stated that the experience was “hard to put into words”. As much as this novel connection experience was not familiar to the participants prior to the study, it also does

not appear to be known to the literature. No existing construct has been found to capture this connection experience. Some constructs may be closely related. Siegel's (2007) *attunement*, with one's internal world attending to and holding the internal world of another, seems related in terms of the deep connection experience. It also captures active engagement while perhaps lending itself to interdependent collaboration, but does not appear to necessarily capture the body-based, whole-self aspects. Fishbane's (2013) *continual rapport* finds couple partners growing so deeply connected, through pervasive mirroring and reflecting dynamics across time, that partners begin to even physically resemble one another. This construct appears to capture subtle elements of a deep connection experience, but refers to an indirect and even automatic transmission rather than an active and intentional practice. Fishbane (2013) and others also used the term *resonance*, which appears to be a high-order category encompassing various experiences within particularly potent relationships, including subtle, automatic, bodily, and often unconscious processes. Still, this term does not appear to capture the novel connection experience and its three aspects. Finally, Wilbur's *unity* is a construct that captures deep, meaningful connection, with a spiritual basis. However, the transpersonal development constructs such as this one appear to exclude essentially body-based and psychophysiological phenomena, just as the interpersonal neurobiology concepts appear to exclude the spiritual phenomena.

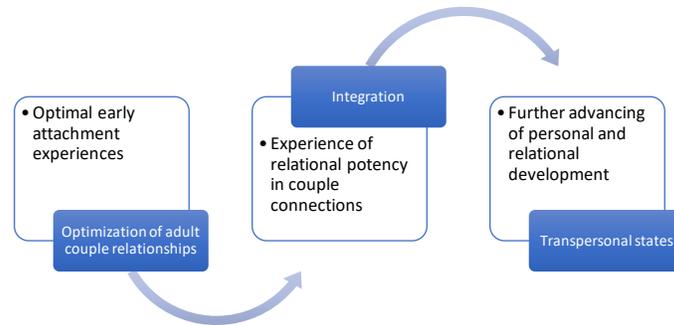
An apt name for the connection experience does not appear to exist across the theoretical literature, which is suggestive of the fact that this is a new couple connection phenomenon, not previously investigated. It is possible that this connection experience is particular to the partner yoga for couples practice, and was not identifiable in prior

research of other practices. Indeed, the couples had expressed not finding this novel connection experience elsewhere in their couple lives.

In the absence of a known construct that names this connection experience, a new term is proposed. It was seen earlier in this present research that the construct of integration was common to both theoretical frameworks of interpersonal neurobiology and transpersonal development. Integration is representative across these frameworks treating advanced personal and relational development, in which optimal relational experiences can be accessed, leading to further advancing of personal and relational development (see figure 3.2 below, originally shown on p.52):



Integration was also an aspect of relational development within the proposed Integrative Model of Relational Connection, combining attachment, interpersonal neurobiological, and transpersonal development theories. In this model, optimal early attachment experiences predispose an individual to capacities allowing for the optimization of adult couple relationships, and the experience of relational potency. Developmental integration is seen as a product of these potent relational experiences, as well as a process leading to further advancing of personal and relational development, leading to experiences in the transpersonal phase of development (see figure 3.3 below, originally shown on p.53).



Based on accounts of experience by the participant couples, and the theoretical frameworks of this research, it is proposed that the novel connection experience is an experience of Integrative Connection. The term *integrative connection* is taken from the proposed theoretical model above and is meant to refer to this experience of novel couple connection, based in active engagement, through the body-based whole-person, and through interdependent collaboration. This integrative connection experience is understood as taking place within relational potency, and also a broad, personal and relational, developmental process.

**Partner yoga for couples as an attachment-related experience.** Participant experiences of partner yoga for couples were explored in terms of attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality. Because of the lack of research and understanding on partner yoga for couples, the concepts were brought into this study, to broaden the explorations of participant experiences, and to check for their relevance to participant experiences. In exploring these specific concepts with participants, the aforementioned findings on novel connection experience—integrative connection—with its emerging themes of actively engaging, whole-self integrating, and interdependently collaborating, were replicated. This shows internal consistency within the participants' experiences of the novel connection, such that the experiences emerged in examinations

of both general partner yoga experiences and specific aspects thereof.

Participant experiences were rich and complex with regard to attachment in partner yoga. Attachment tended to be experienced as a process of developing trust. The partner yoga experience was said to feel, at times, different, challenging, and 'risky'. This experience reportedly required the couple partners to rely and depend upon one another for support in order for the couple to meet the challenge and generate 'good' outcomes, together. The partner practices tended to be perceived as requiring that the couple act as one, because neither partner couple could create by themselves what the couple was attempting. The couple partners were also dependent upon one another for counterbalancing the balancing that each was trying to contribute to the whole. Couples reported feeling a need to communicate well in order to work well together. Nonverbal communication emerged as an important theme within this experience, allowing for a salient attunement as the couple partners reportedly learned to attend internally to one another's cues, to sense their needs and states. Couple partners reported feeling themselves accommodating, and being accommodated, in terms of these needs and states, with a mutual, internal holding of one another's experiences.

When the couples felt successful at relating and producing practice outcomes in this way, they noted feelings of increasing trust, closeness, and comfort. It is through these processes that the practice was understood as developing trust. When the couples were able to immerse in this emerging feeling of trust, they then reported working well together and feeling well together. These experiences were consistent with a shift in internal working models, as couples reported finding themselves approaching and responding in new ways, as well as perceiving their partners in a more positive light, and

developmentally internalizing these shifts. It appears that through this shifting of internal working models and evolution of the couple (Bowlby 1969), partner yoga can impart a corrective emotional experience (Alexander & French, 1946), leading the partners and whole couple to a more secure, less insecure, manner of relating. The practice could also be seen as furthering the relational developmental processes of the integrative model for relational connection, in its optimization of adult couple relationships.

**Developmental experiences within couple functioning in partner yoga for couples.** Distinct experiences of couple functioning within the partner yoga practice appeared to be lived by each participant couple, seemingly without meaningful convergences in the content of these experiences, and according to what was relevant in their own couple life and functioning at that time. What did emerge as common across experiences, was personal and couple growth and development. Each couple's unique challenges existing outside of the practice, in their daily lives, were found to be transferred onto the practice. The practice tended to heighten these experiences, so that they were "the same, but more obvious". Although the partner yoga practice did not seek to directly address couple conflict, disconnect, or dysfunction, the couples still reported improvements in these dynamics across the practice. This appears to be suggestive of the symbolism discussed in transpersonal development theory (Wilbur, 1996). Symbolism allows the body and unconscious mind to process, indirectly and through representation, aspects of experience that are not within awareness, at any given time. The concept of symbolism would appear to provide a possible explanation for the shifting experienced in conflictual, disconnection, and dysfunctional dynamics: with these issues being transferred onto the practice, they could be worked out indirectly and representationally

through a process of *symbolic resolution*.

Other couples not reporting disconnect or dysfunction experiences in their daily lives still reported personal and relational developmental experiences through couple functioning in partner yoga, such as improved closeness, connection, and balance. In both symbolic resolution and enhanced wellness experiences, couples reported discovering a new sense of the couple, in which they could separate from conflict and other mundanities and “find one another again in the darkness”. While the couples each reported experiences related to the concerns in their own personal and couple lives, the general trend of these experiences was that of developmental process, appearing to bring couples toward, or through, relational potency experiences.

**A potential for self-expansiveness and spirituality experiences in partner yoga for couples.** For each self-expansiveness and spirituality in partner yoga for couples, there was a large group of participants who reported having these experiences, and a smaller sub-group that did not. The groups differed in terms of identifications with, and openness to, these experiences, as expressed by the participants themselves during the research interviews. In some cases, the participants in the sub-groups verbalized their experiences in similar ways to those in the experiencing groups, but named these experiences differently (e.g., what many couples referred to as a spiritual experience, sub-group couples also experienced, but called ‘physical’ or ‘emotional’ experiences). This suggests that the experiences themselves might be more consistent across couples than is the meaning made of these experiences. It also suggests that one’s cognitive interpretations can act as a filter, leading to the potential for these experiences to be fulfilled, or not, according to the existing degree of openness.

Partner yoga for couples can be seen as potentially offering an experience of self-expansiveness, and when the couple is open to this and has the experience, couple partners tend to report discovering a greater sense of togetherness and couple unity. This couple unity may be similar to the concept of transpersonal unity, described in transpersonal development theory (Wilbur, 1996). It may be the case that couples for whom the concept of self-expansiveness did resonate were further along in their personal development processes, capable of shifting toward having a transpersonal experience. Those for whom the experience of self-expansiveness did not resonate were perhaps those who were earlier in their own developmental processes, incapable yet of being stretched toward the transpersonal phase or even isolated transpersonal experiences. In terms of spirituality, it would appear that a significant, personally spiritual experience can potentially be rendered accessible through partner yoga practice for couples, however one's own sense of spirituality, spiritual self, and prior spiritual experiences would be primordial in determining how those experiences would be interpreted.

**Summary and conclusions of the review.** In sum, couples were found to access a significant experience of integrative connection through the practice of partner yoga, based in active engagement of the whole person, in a body-based way, that joins couples in interdependent collaboration. These experiences are suggestive of a relational development process in partner yoga for couples that is potent and corrective, consistent with the proposed integrative model of relational connection. A potential was shown for couples to immerse in experiences of openness to self-expansive couple unity and to a personal spirituality. Other important elements of the experience included development of trust, symbolic resolution of couple conflict and dysfunction, and enhancement of

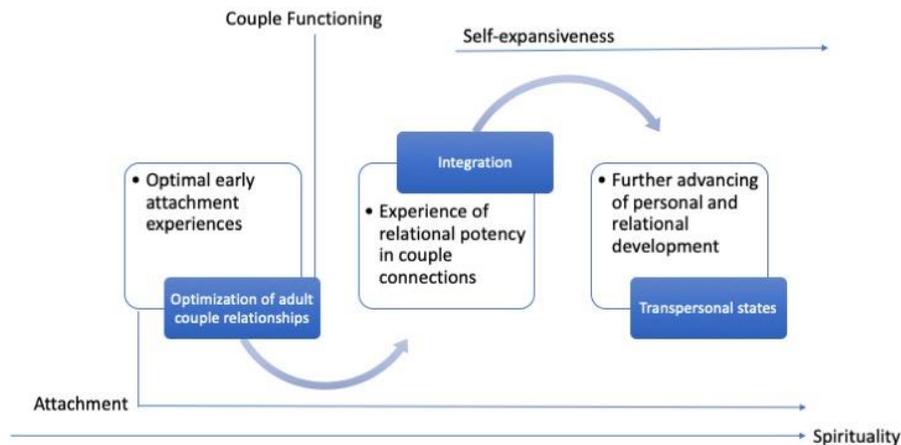
wellness in the partners and couple as a whole, fuelling the personal and relational growth and development.

The couples' meaning-making was seen as co-constructed in part through the research process, including the intersubjective interactions between participant and researcher regarding the research questions. For instance, experiences described in response to the couple functioning question were also reported elsewhere in response to other questions. These experiences had not necessarily been understood as couple functioning experiences, until the research question had posed them in that way. In contrast, the integrative connection experience and its three sub-themes, of: (1) active engagement, (2) body-based whole-self connecting, and (3) interdependent collaboration, were reported by the couples at the beginning of the interviews, even in the absence of any question asking about their lived experiences of connection in the practice. This information emerged automatically, without being prompted, from the participants themselves, in response to the broad and general question about how partner yoga was experienced. The integrative connection experiences are therefore understood as core experiential phenomena for these participants in this partner yoga for couples practice.

It was noted above that experiences of attachment, couple functioning, self-expansiveness, and spirituality were understood as aspects of the overall experience of partner yoga for couples. These elements of experience can be incorporated, with the concept of integrative connection, into the developmental model for integrative relational connection. Attachment was understood as an experience underlying all relational process, and potentiating development. Couple functioning was understood as a moment-to-moment experience bridging overall, daily couple realities with any one moment of

reality upon which it can be transferred. Self-expansiveness was understood as a transpersonal developmental experience, both fuelled by, and further fuelling, advanced personal and relational process. And spirituality was understood as a subjective part of self and experience that encompasses these potent experiences. These integrations can be depicted in the Developmental Process of Integrative Relational Connecting. See figure 6.1, below.

Figure 6.1: Developmental Model of Integrative Relational Connecting, shown with identified elements of experience.



### Clinical Applications for Couple Psychotherapy

The findings of this research contribute basic understandings of the partner yoga practice in terms of how this is experienced by, and what it can mean for, couples. While direct clinical applications were not the point of investigation, the findings can shed some light on clinical process in couple psychotherapy.

There is no clinical modality currently known to integrate partner yoga into couple psychotherapy in any systematic way. The holistic, body-based modality of Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy (PACT) (Solomon & Tatkin, 2011) does

however integrate the bodily, and present moment, lived experience of couple partners into conventional talking psychotherapy. The result is a therapy that focusses on psychophysiological coregulation to achieve improved emotional connection and de-escalation of conflict, to heal and strengthen the couple. Little research has evaluated the effectiveness of PACT, or examined lived experiences of the therapy. The principles and practices of PACT, however, resemble those of partner yoga for couples, insofar as both are holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) and body-based couple experiences that are developmentally-oriented and centered in lived experiences of connection. The findings of this study can be seen as providing preliminary, indirect evidence for the continued application and research of the PACT modality.

Partner yoga for couples is made up of series of specific practices, and these can be integrated as interventions within a conventional course of couple therapy. Based on the findings of this study, use of these interventions could be expected to help enhance couple connection, even encouraging an experience of integrative connection, if couple partners can be led to actively engage together, in a body-based way using various parts of whole self, and immersing in interdependent collaboration. A practice consistently described by participant couples as engendering this multi-faceted connection experience was the partner tree pose, along with other similar joint balancing postures. These require little space and time, and would be accessible interventions for clinicians able to guide them, perhaps already having some knowledge and experience in yoga and/or in body-based couple clinical work. Nonverbal relating practices such as eye contact, touch, shared breathing, and mutual sensing can also be emphasized as an experiential element within any couple therapy modality, and would be expected to enhance couple

connection.

The partner yoga programs empirically studied to-date (Milbury et. al., 2015, Carson et. al., 2004, this present study) were offered in workshop format. The findings of this present research support continued use of workshops as a format through which the partner yoga programs can be offered. This is expected to be useful for distressed and non-distressed couples alike, in accordance with participant experiences of both symbolic resolution of ongoing couple challenges, and enhancement of pre-existing holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) wellness. For couples seeking a combination of targeted and broad support, or wanting to enhance experiences of wellness and connection, a partner yoga program such as this one can be followed concurrently to a course of conventional couple therapy.

While these initial findings are promising in terms of partner yoga as a potent and meaningful development practice for couples, clinicians should take caution before attempting to integrate these practices into clinical work without prior knowledge and training on how to do so. The practice was found in this study to be an immersive experience, with the participants actively engaging in the immediate present, and living these experiences deeply. They reported novel connection and development experiences, and accessed parts of self and other not previously encountered. A body-based, whole-self experience was also said to have taken place, implicating self and other in an authentic and intimate way. The partner yoga experiences also took place within a significant attachment relationship, which can be especially laden, emotionally and otherwise. It was also seen that the psychological traditions reviewed here tended to overlook some spiritual aspects of the person, while spiritual traditions tended to

overlook some psychophysiological aspects. For these reasons, the partner yoga practice is seen as an especially evocative couple experience, and it is proposed here that clinicians should be versed in both yogic and psychotherapeutic traditions prior to integrating the two.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study shares limitations with all IPA and qualitative studies, including subjectivity of the data, risk of researcher bias, descriptive nature of the findings, and relatively small sample size (Creswell, 2007). While the sample size for this study was sufficiently large, surpassing many documented standards for IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), a still larger sample size could have yielded more data, including additional nuances in convergences and divergences of participant experiences. The sample was also relatively homogeneous, and perhaps different types of experiences would have emerged in different types of couples.

The decision to interview couples as a unit could be seen as a limitation because hearing the couple voice could risk obscuring the idiosyncratic complexities in the voice of either partner. It was noted across the analysis that couples tended to express what was perceived by the researcher as a unified voice, either co-created through joint meaning-making processes, or else already co-existing in both individuals at once. In instances where couple partners were demonstrating lack of consensus, the researcher considered both of these voices so that all realities could be represented.

Yoga is an ancient holistic and religious-based system that includes many different types of practices (Sivananda, 1941/1999). Different interpretations of yogic theory and practice have resulted in the existence of countless different practice programs. Partner

yoga itself is but one interpretation of the ancient teachings. It would be impossible to include all yogic practices in any one study, or to fully capture a purity or completeness of the whole existence of yoga. Many popular yoga forms in Western culture practice only the asana (physical postures), and do so for the pursuit of exercise or fitness, effectively isolating these asana from their traditional, spiritual, and holistic contexts. The Sivananda yoga and Vedanta practice was selected for this research because of its direct links to the ancient practice, through its lineage of teachings tracing back to the sacred texts of Hinduism (i.e.: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and Bhagavad Gita in the Vedic texts). This practice was also selected because it is broad and multi-faceted, and holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927), including many different practices.

### **Strengths of the Study**

It was noted earlier in this research process that the holism of this project is among its major underlying themes, strengths, and contributions. It was built upon the foundation of an expanded view of the person and of the couple, informed by holism and body-based principles, while also welcoming the topic of spirituality. Through this integration of the various aspects of the person, and the couple, an increasingly all-encompassing understanding is achieved.

The findings were based in lived experiences of eleven couples. While standards in IPA range broadly, this number is large for that method. Smaller samples are considered useful in IPA because they allow for a very deep immersion in the subjective realities of those participants, including thorough examination of the nuanced details therein. The exceeding depth of an IPA analysis can come at the cost of breadth and scope. Because of the expansive nature of the doctoral thesis process however, this research was able to

closely examine the lived experiences of eleven couples, while also covering breadth across the variety of participants and also theoretical breadth. Because the participants were couples, each meaning unit in their reports was already a convergence. These findings can be seen as actually representing the in-depth experiences of 22 individuals within their couple contexts.

The proposed model for integrative relational development is a trans-theoretical contribution, incorporating attachment, interpersonal neurobiological, and transpersonal development theories. What has resulted is a holistic understanding of mutually-perpetuating exchanges between personal and relational advanced developmental trajectories, including the experience of integrative connection.

The model for integrative relational development, as well as the concept of integrative connection, are expected to inform the field of couple therapy in a new way. Because of the newness of partner yoga research and East-West integrations, this research has contributed a perspective on couple and relational realities that had not been well-documented before. The findings of this research are expected to form a basis of knowledge upon which further understandings and treatment of couples can be constructed. As was emphasized by the participant couples, these potential understandings and interventions would be expected to meaningfully support a broad range of couples, including those experiencing dysfunction and disconnect, and those already experiencing stable relational potency. In terms of strengths of the research and contribution to the field, significant power is perceived in the ability of the partner yoga practice to make accessible to couples the ancient wisdom tradition of yoga, to promote healing, growth and development, and holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927), integrative wellness

in its practitioners.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As basic research does, this study has opened many avenues for further empirical investigations. In terms of research on partner yoga for couples, countless directions are possible, given the small number of articles published to-date. This research has served to show that partner yoga can be a relevant topic of study, and important developmental and relational process for couples, leading to novel, integrative connection experiences. Future research could seek to explore parameters around what partner yoga for couples is, including meaningfulness or impact of specific practices or groupings thereof. Some couples suggested that a longer study could have yielded more potent, transformative experiences. It would be interesting to uncover any dosing or titration effects, as well as to explore or measure outcomes longitudinally. Best practices in applying partner yoga to the couple psychotherapy context are as yet not established, and many questions exist around who can teach or direct partner yoga as a practice, or psychotherapeutic intervention, and why. The place for spiritual teachings and practices, within a culture that may not be as open to these is unclear, and yet partner yoga can be seen as inherently, and even invariably, spiritual. This dilemma can be further clarified in future theoretical and phenomenological research. The intersection between partner yoga for couples practice and transpersonal development stages, should be better explored, to illuminate how joint yoga practice between couple partners can interact with the most advanced developmental process known to these theories, unearthing the other side of that developmental spectrum. Finally, the relationship between mindfulness for couples

and partner yoga for couples constructs is not understood, and would require further research to tease out.

In terms of research to better understand integrative connection, future exploratory studies could seek to engage with couple experiences to find out more about this phenomenon, including how restricted it may be, or not, to partner yoga. It would be useful to explore how common the three sub-themes are and whether other important elements of the connection experience exist, if couples can come to intentionally conjure up this state, and what the specific impacts might be, upon the couple and its partners, of regular immersion in the connection experience. Finally, integrative connection can become better understood through interpersonal neurobiology frameworks and neuroscientific explorations seeking to establish understandings of its psychophysiological bases, as well as transpersonal development frameworks that can investigate it as a potential embodied spirituality and transpersonal state. Attachment theory has been well-applied to prepersonal and personal development stages, but attachment in transpersonal development and states still remains a mystery.

In terms of research to better understand body-based holism in couples, more research could investigate couple phenomena from a holistic (Smuts, 2010/1927) perspective, particularly taking care to integrate the body-based and spiritual aspects less frequently considered, along with the cognitive and emotional, which are more frequently considered. The participants in this present research insisted that powerful connection experiences emerged when the mind was quieted. They reported that it appeared to be the expanding beyond the confines of one's cognitive experiences that allowed them to find connection, pleasure, and meaning. They asserted that when they had a lot on their

minds, they were not experiencing connection with themselves, their partners, and the practice, in the immediate present. These findings call into question some aspects of the dominant cognitive paradigm prevalent in some psychology disciplines.

In terms of research seeking to further East-West wisdom and epistemological integrations, this foray into the empirical examination of an under-researched contemplative practice, was but a single step. It might be especially yielding for future psychological studies to investigate applied aspects of yoga and Hinduism, from a philosophical, Vedanta standpoint, thus looking for opportunities to translate and unite these two separate worldviews.

### **Conclusion**

Although partner yoga is an under-researched, not well-understood construct in psychology, it has deep roots as an ancient cultural and religious, holistic, lifestyle practice. In the yoga community, when partner yoga is practiced between couples, couples often seem to discuss special experiences such as depth, connection, and transcendence which they seem to access by practicing together. Prior to this research, the empirical literature had only begun to capture and explore these special experiences. After this research, psychology has now a bit more of an understanding of what partner yoga potentially might be, and could mean, for practicing couples. Further work in this line of research is expected to yield important insights into couple experiences and treatment, partner yoga and holistic contemplative development practices, and continued integrations of Eastern contemplative wisdom and Western epistemologies.

That all eleven participant couples in this study reported a novel connection experience unlike anything they had ever experienced before, is an important basis from

which to continue seeking to understand. Prior to this research, couple connection had mostly regarded cognitive and affective realities. The study of attunement has evolved across different psychological eras, from an experience of mutual understanding (Gottman, 1994), to an experience of mutual understanding and feeling (Johnson, 2004), to now something more abstract and subtle but complex and more integrative, like an experience of mutually feeling another's feelings, both 'getting', and 'holding' these inside one's self, and mutually affecting, and allowing one's self to become affected by, other (Siegel, 2007). The interdependent and even metaphysical portrayals of transpersonal development theory and Hinduism, in conjunction with the findings of this present research, are suggestive of a reality of connection that runs still deeper and more wholly. Couples who are deeply connected regularly experience sleep harmony, a phenomenon where two deeply connected people spontaneously awaken from deep sleep at the exact same time, and mother-baby duos have empirically demonstrated countless points of true, harmonious symbiosis, where mother feels and even anticipates baby's needs and states, automatically, before baby can objectively be found to express them (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014). Perhaps these phenomena, combined with the findings of this present research, point toward the next frontier in couple, connection, and contemplative research. It can clear a path toward empirical investigation of connections like these, that are post-verbal and perhaps also post-conscious, and likely spiritual—it can explore the far reaches of these connections, to reveal exactly how deeply and wholly they run, and just how far they can take us.

“We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep.”

- William James

### References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behaviour of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41: 49-67.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Bell, S. M., & Stayton, D. (1971). Individual differences in Strange Situation behaviour of one-year-olds. In H. R. Schaffer (Ed.). *The Origins of Human Social Relations* (pp. 17-57). London: Academic Press.
- Ainsworth, M.D., Blehar, M, Waters, E, & Wall, S. (1978) Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Alexander, F. & French, T. F. (1946). *Psychoanalytic Therapy: Principles and Application*. New York, NY: Ronald Press.
- Ammaniti, M. & Gallese, V. (2014). *The Birth of Intersubjectivity: Psychodynamics, Neurobiology, and the Self*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Asber, C. E. (2014). *Qualities of Mindfulness and Relationship Satisfaction: How Mindfulness Training in One Partner Affects a Relationship*, California School of Professional Psychology: Alliant International University, thesis for Doctor of Psychology.
- Atkinson, B. J. (2013). Mindfulness training and the cultivation of secure, satisfying couple relationships, *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2 (2): 73-94.
- Beckerman, N. L., & Sarracco, M. (2011). Enhancing emotionally focused couple therapy through the practice of mindfulness: A case analysis, *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 22: 1-15.

- Bertalanffy, L. (1973). *General System Theory: Foundations, development, applications*. New York, NY: G. Braziller.
- Biggerstaff, D. (2008). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A qualitative methodology of choice in healthcare research, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5: 173-183.
- Birnie, K., Garland, S. N., & Carlson, L. E. (2010), Psychological benefits for cancer patients and their partners participating in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), *Psycho-Oncology*, 19: 1004-1009.
- Bohy, N. (2010). *A Qualitative Study of Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement and its contributions to relationship resilience*, California School of Professional Psychology: Alliant International University, thesis for Doctor of Psychology.
- Bowen M. (1978). *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson.
- Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 39: 350-371.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books
- Bussing, A., Michalsen, A., Khalsa, S. B. S., Telles, S., Sherman, K. J. (2012). Effects of yoga on mental and physical health: A short summary of reviews, *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2012.
- Cabral, P. Meyer, H. B., Ames, D. (2011). Effectiveness of yoga therapy as a complementary treatment for major psychiatric disorders: A meta-analysis, *Primary Care Companion CNS Disorders*, 13 (4).
- Cano, A., Corley, A. M., Clark, S. M., & Martinez, S. C. (2018). A couple-based psychological treatment for chronic pain and relationship distress, *Cognitive and*

- Behavioural Practice*, (1): 119-134.
- Carson, J. W., Carson, K. M., Gil, K. M., & Baucom, D. H. (2004). Mindfulness-based relationship enhancement, *Behaviour Therapy*, 35: 471-494.
- Chou, W. (2004). The Effect of Breathwork Therapy on Marital Relationships, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling.
- Cozolino, L. (2006). *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Brain*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Cramer, H., Lauche, R., Langhorst, J., Dobos, G. (2013). Yoga for Depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Depression and Anxiety*, 30 (11).
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Diamond, N. & Marrone, M. (2004). *Attachment and Intersubjectivity*. Philadelphia, PA: Whurr Publishers.
- Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 43: 13-35.
- Fishbane, M. D. (2013). *Loving with the Brain in Mind: Neurobiology & Couple Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Fogel, A. (2009). *Body Sense: The science and practice of embodied self-awareness*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Fisher, C., Hauck, Y., Bayes, S., & Byrne, J. (2012). Participant experiences of mindfulness-based childbirth education: A qualitative study, *Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 12:126.
- Friedman, H. L. (1983). The Self-Expansiveness Level Form: A conceptualization and

- measurement of a transpersonal construct, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 15 (1): 37-50.
- Gallagher, K. E., Hudepohl, A. D., & Parrott, D. J. (2010). Power of being present: The role of mindfulness on the relation between men's alcohol use and sexual aggression toward intimate partners, *Aggressive Behaviour*, 36: 405-413.
- Gambrel, L. E., & Keeling, M. L. (2010). Relational aspects of mindfulness: Implications for the practice of marriage and family therapy, *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 32: 412-426.
- Gambrel, L. E. (2015). Mindfulness-based relationship education for couples expecting their first child—Part 2: Phenomenological findings, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 41 (1): 25-41.
- Gillespie, B. (2013). The Relational Effects of Mindfulness Training: A Phenomenological Study, Drexel University, thesis for Doctor of Philosophy.
- Gillespie, B., Davey, M. P., & Flemke, K. (2015). Intimate partners' perspectives on the relational effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction training: A qualitative research study, *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 37: 396-407.
- Giorgi, A. (Ed.) (1985). *Phenomenology in Psychological Research*. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University.
- Gottman, J. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail And how you can Make Yours Last*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52: 511-524.
- Hertz, R. M. (2013). Mindfulness, Relationship Quality, and Stress Response to Conflict,

- Thesis for Master of Science in Department of Psychology.
- Horrigan-Kelly, M., Millar, M., & Dowling, M. (2016). Understanding the key tenets of Heidegger's philosophy for interpretative phenomenological research, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, January-December 2016: 1-8.
- Hycner, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines or the phenomenological analysis of interviewer data, *Human Studies*, 8: 279-303.
- Janz, P., Pepping, C. A., & Halford, W. K. (2015). Individual differences in dispositional mindfulness and initial romantic attraction: A speed dating experiment, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 82: 14-19.
- Johnson, Susan M. (2004). *The Practice of Emotionally Focussed Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kaspro, M. C. & Scotton, B. W. (1999). A Review of Transpersonal Theory and its Application to the Practice of Psychotherapy, *The Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research*, 8: 12-23.
- Khaddouma, A., Gordon, K. C., & Bolden, J. (2015a). Zen and the art of dating: Mindfulness, differentiation of self, and satisfaction in dating relationships, *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 4 (1): 1-13.
- Khaddouma, A., Gordon, K. C., & Bolden, J. (2015b). Zen and the art of sex: Examining associations among mindfulness, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction in dating relationships, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 30 (2): 268-285.
- Khalifan, C. E., & Barry, R. A. (2016). Trust, attachment, and mindfulness influence intimacy and disengagement during newlywed's discussions of relationship transgressions, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30: 592-601.

Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., Christain, L., Preston, H., Houts, C. R., Malarkey, W. B., Emery, C.

F., Glaser, R. (2011). Stress, inflammation, and yoga practice, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 72 (2).

Larkin, M. & Thompson, A. (2012). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In A

Thompson & D Harper (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*. John Wiley & Sons, Oxford, pp. 99-116.

Laurent, H. K., Hertz, R., Nelson, B., & Laurent, S. M. (2016). Mindfulness during

romantic conflict moderates the impact of negative partner behaviours on cortisol responses, *Hormones and Behaviour*, 79: 45-51.

Luedtke, Brandi, Davis, L., & Monson, C. (2015). Mindfulness-based cognitive-

behavioural conjoint therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder: A case study, *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 45: 227-234.

McCarthy, B., & Wald, L. M. (2013). Mindfulness and good enough sex, *Sexual and*

*Relationship Therapy*, 2(1-2): 39-47.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics,*

*and Change*. Paperback Ed. New York: The Guildford Press.

Milbury, K., et. al. (2015) Couple-based Tibetan yoga program for lung cancer patients

and their caregivers, *Psycho-Oncology*, 24: 117-120.

Nanda, J. (2013). Mindful relationships, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 28 (1-2): 120-

131.

Neff, K. D., Beretvas, S. N. (2013). The role of self-compassion in romantic

relationships, *Self and Identity*, 12: 78-98.

- Nelson, B. W., Laurent, S. M., Bernstein, R., & Laurent, H. K. (2017). Perspective-taking influences autonomic attunement between partners during discussion of conflict, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 34 (2): 139-165.
- Pakenham, K. L., & Samlos, C. (2013). Couples coping with multiple sclerosis: a dyadic perspective on the roles of mindfulness and acceptance, *Journal of Behavioural Medicine*, 36: 389-400.
- Peterson, B. D., Eifert, G. H., Feingold, T., & Davidson, S. (2009). Using acceptance and commitment therapy to treat distressed couples: A case study with two couples, *Cognitive and Behavioural Practice*, 16: 430-442.
- Peterson, B. D., & Eifert, G. H. (2011). Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to treat infertility stress, *Cognitive and Behavioural Practice*, 18: 577-587.
- Pietkiewicz, I. & Smith, J.A. (2012) A practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Czasopismo Psychologiczne*, 18(2), 361-369. English translation retrieved online: <https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id>
- Priestley, J., McPherson, S. (2016). Experiences of adults providing care to a partner or relative with depression: A meta-ethnographic synthesis, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 192: 41-49.
- Reiners, G. M. (2012). Understanding the differences between Husserl's (descriptive) and Heidegger's (interpretive) phenomenological research, *Nursing & Care*, 1 (5).
- Ross, A., Bevans, M., Friedmann, E., Williams, L., & Thomas, S. (2014). "I am a nice person when I do yoga!!!": A qualitative analysis of how yoga affects relationships, *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 32 (2): 67-78.

- Schellekens, M. P. J., et.al. (2017). Are mindfulness and self-compassion related to psychological distress and communication in couples facing lung cancer?: A dyadic approach, *Mindfulness*, 8: 325-336.
- Siegel, D. (1999). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape who we are*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Siegel, D. J. (2012). *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2007). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, J. A. Smith (Ed.). Sage Publishing.
- Smuts, J. C. (2010/1927). *Holism and Evolution*. 2nd Ed. Kissinger Legacy Reprints.
- Solomon, M. & Tatkin, S. (2011). *Love and War in Intimate Relationships: Connection, Disconnection, and Mutual Regulation in Couple Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 38, 15–28.
- Swami Sivananda (1941/1999). *Vedanta for Beginners*. WWW Edition. The Divine Life Society, Uttar Pradesh, Himalayas, India.
- Swami Vishnu-devananda (1959). *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*. New York,

NY: Three Rivers Press.

Swart, A. (2011). Partner yoga for establishing boundaries in relationship: A transpersonal somatic approach, *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 21: 74-83.

Wei, M., Russell, D. W., Mallinckrodt, B., Vogel, D. L. (2007). The Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR)-Short form: Reliability, validity, and factor structure, *Journal of Personality Assessment*; 88 (2): 187-204.

Wertz, F. J. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52 (2): 167-177.

Wilbur, K. (1996). *The Atman Project*. Wilton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House.

## APPENDIX A – ETHICS CERTIFICATE (REB)



UNIVERSITÉ  
SAINT-PAUL  
UNIVERSITY

16-02-2018  
dd-mm-yyyy

Bureau de la recherche et de la déontologie  
Office of Research and Ethics

**Ethics Certificate  
Research Ethics Board (REB)**

**REB File Number** 1360.13/17

**Principal Investigator / Thesis supervisor / Co-investigators / Student**

<u>Last name</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Packard	Reesa	Faculty of Human Sciences	Student-Principal Investigator
Malette	Judith	Faculty of Human Sciences	Thesis Supervisor
Rovers	Martin	Faculty of Human Sciences	Thesis Supervisor

**Type of project** Doctoral Thesis

**Title** The pull of partner yoga: Interpretive phenomenological analysis of couple experiences in a traditional Sivananda yoga partner practice, with investigations in attachment, dyadic adjustment, and transpersonal development.

<u>Approval date</u>	<u>Expiry Date</u>	<u>Decision</u>
16-02-2018 (dd-mm-yyyy)	15-02-2019 (dd-mm-yyyy)	1 (approved)

**Committee comments:**

The Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board (REB) approved the project.  
The researcher is invited to use the reference number 1360.13/17 when recruiting participants.

In accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, the Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board has examined and approved the application for an ethics certificate for this project for the period indicated and subject to the conditions listed above.

The research protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB. This includes, among others, the extension of the research, additional recruitment for the inclusion of new participants, changes in location of the fieldwork, any stage where a research permit is required, such as work in schools. Minor administrative changes are allowed.

The REB must be notified of all changes or unanticipated circumstances that have a serious impact on the conduct of the research, that relate to the risk to participants and their safety. Modifications to the project, information, consent and recruitment documentation must be submitted to the Office of Research and Ethics for approval by the REB.

The investigator must submit a report four weeks prior to the expiry date of the certificate stated above requesting an extension or that the file be closed.

Documents relating to publicity, recruitment and consent of participants should bear the file number of the certificate. They must also indicate the coordinates of the investigator should participants have questions related to the research project. In which case, the documents will refer to the Chair of the REB and provide the coordinates of the Office of Research and Ethics.

**Signature**

Louis Perron  
Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB)

1/1

APPENDIX B – RECRUITMENT POSTER

Be part of an important new research study!

**School of Counselling, Psychotherapy, & Spirituality  
Saint Paul University**

**RESEARCH IN PARTNER YOGA FOR COUPLES IS  
NEEDING COUPLE PARTICIPANTS**

We are looking for volunteer couples to take part in a study on the experiences of couples in partner yoga.

**As a participant in this study, you would have the opportunity to participate in 4 free partner yoga weekend workshops of approximately 3 hours each!**

You would be asked to fill out questionnaires and have an interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences.

Couples must be: together for 2 years or more, living together full time, and not currently having or ever having had their own personal yoga practice.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive 15\$ per couple, per visit, to help buffer any costs incurred by participating (such as transport or childcare costs).

Psychotherapists and psychotherapists-in-training are welcome to participate!

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

**Reesa Packard, M.A., R.P., Ph.D. (Candidate)**  
**Department of Counselling & Spirituality**  
**Thesis Supervisors: Dr. Judith Malette & Dr. Martin Rovers**

**The study has been reviewed and approved by the  
Research Ethics Review Board, Saint Paul University.**

## APPENDIX C – PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



UNIVERSITÉ  
SAINT-PAUL  
UNIVERSITY

**Consent Form**

*If printed, the consent form must be on University letterhead.*

**Title of the study:** Partner Yoga for Couples.

**Name of researcher:** Reesa Packard, M.A., R.P., Ph.D. (Candidate), Registered Psychotherapist

**Supervised by:** Dr. Judith Malette & Dr. Martin Rovers

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by student researcher Reesa Packard and supervisors Dr. Judith Malette and Dr. Martin Rovers. This project has been funded by Ontario Graduate Scholarship and Society for Pastoral Counselling Research.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to find out what happens within a couple when the couple partners engage in a partner yoga practice together.

**Participation:** My participation will consist of attending and participating in four partner yoga workshops of approximately three hours each, taking place on consecutive Sundays, during which I will perform partner yoga practices, including physical postures, meditation, and relaxation. These workshops have been scheduled for *(TBD)*. I will also be asked to fill out two rounds of three questionnaires. I will also be asked to participate in an interview after the workshop series to discuss my experiences of partner yoga.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I share information about my experiences and about my relationship, and this may cause me to feel uncertain of how to process or understand this information. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, and that I can have access to the support of a psychotherapist if ever I found that any part of what I experienced during this research process stayed with me in a way that was distressing.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will allow me to experience partner yoga and any benefits that might come about as a result of this practice, for myself alone as well as for my couple. My participation in this research process will also contribute to the advancement of knowledge about couple processes in general, and especially, how partner yoga is experienced by couples.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for research purposes, seeking to develop an understanding about the experiences of couples in partner yoga, and that my confidentiality will be protected. I understand that my name and the name of my partner will be concealed and that the information that I contribute to this research cannot be traced back to me. No

confidential information whatsoever will be shared with any third party at any time. *In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure your confidentiality during email communication and forwarding of any questionnaires filled out electronically, we recommend that you use standard safety measures such as signing out of your account, closing your browser and locking your screen or device when you are no longer using them / when you have completed the study.*

**Anonymity:** Absolute anonymity is not possible within this study since questionnaires will be returned to the researcher electronically and will initially have to be identified using names until these can be replaced with the proper codes. Once the coding scheme is in place, there will no longer be any usage of names, and no documents whatsoever containing identifiable information will be retained.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including questionnaires, visual and audio records of interviews, and notes, will be kept in a secure manner. All paper copies of this data will be destroyed, and only electronic versions will be retained. These electronic versions will be stored on a password-protected USB key, and will only be accessible by the researcher and research supervisors, named above.

**Compensation:** A token compensation of 15\$ will be given to each couple for each of their visits to the university for the purposes of the study, i.e.: each of the four workshop sessions and the interview session. This compensation is intended to help shelter any costs incurred by the participants through their participation in this study, such as transport or childcare costs.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be excluded from the study and destroyed, ensuring continued confidentiality.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Reesa Packard of the Counselling & Spirituality department at Saint Paul University, whose research is under the supervision of Dr. Judith Malette and Dr. Martin Rovers.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.  
If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research and Ethics, Saint Paul University, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, ON K1S 1C4 Tel.: (613) 236-1393

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D – PARTICIPANT SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

(to be completed by researcher) COUPLE CODE: \_\_\_\_\_

Partner (A) Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Partner (B) Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Since when have you been together?: (since year/month) \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently living together full-time?: yes no since: \_\_\_\_\_

Is the couple monogamous?: yes no

Does the couple have any current major unresolved issues that cause distress within the couple, either intermittently or constantly? yes no

If yes, please elaborate: \_\_\_\_\_

Has the couple ever done partner yoga together before?: yes no

If yes to above, when did that(those) practice(s) take place? And what did they entail? \_\_\_\_\_

Has this couple partner ever done partner yoga with anyone else?: yes no

If yes to above, when did that(those) partner yoga practice(s) take place? What did they entail? \_\_\_\_\_

Has this partner ever had any other exposure to yoga in any form?: yes no

If yes to above, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Does this partner hold any specific religious or spiritual worldviews, affiliations, major beliefs, or communities?: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the couple have any children? yes no

If yes to above, how many, and how old?: \_\_\_\_\_

Does this couple partners have any significant emotional, relational, physical, spiritual, or other barriers to practicing partner yoga? yes no

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E – PARTNER YOGA FOR COUPLES WORKSHOP FORMAT

- (1) **SAVASANA—Guided initial relaxation**
- (2) **BHAKTI—Opening prayer:** Gajananam
- (3) **PRANAYAMA—Breathing:** Abdominal breath; Anuloma Viloma; Kappala Bhati
- (4) **SURYA NAMASKAR—Sun salutations:** Gentle or full variations as needed
- (5) **ASANA—Yoga postures:** Classical Sivananda sequence; gentle or full variations
- (6) **SAVASANA—Guided relaxation**
- (7) **DHARANA—Focus and ground together with partner**
- (7) **ASANA—Joint yoga postures:** Standing; forward bend; backbend; balancing
- (8) **DHYANA—Joint meditation practice**
- (9) **SAVASANA—Joint guided final relaxation; silence x 3 minutes**
- (9) **BHAKTI—Closing prayers:** Tryambakam, Asatoma

## APPENDIX F – IPA RESEARCH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Phenomenological Interview A. Fully explore each response with participants before proceeding with the next question.**

- (1) “Please describe your experience of partner yoga?”.
- (2) “Please describe what meaning this experience has had for the couple?”.

**Phenomenological Interview B. Fully explore each response with participants before proceeding with the next question.**

- (1) “What does attachment mean to you?”
- (2) “Describe your experience of attachment in the partner yoga practice?”
- (3) “What does couple functioning mean to you?”
- (4) “Describe your experience of couple functioning in the partner yoga practice?”
- (5) “What does self-expansiveness mean to you?”
- (6) “Describe your experience of self-expansiveness in the partner yoga practice?”
- (7) “What does couple spirituality mean to you?”
- (8) “Describe your experience of spirituality in the partner yoga practice?”

**Additional Interview Questions. Fully explore each response before proceeding with the next question.**

- (1) “What effect, if any, did your practice and your experience have upon your partner? Did theirs have on you? Did these have on the couple unit?”
- (2) “What, if anything, did you learn about yourself, your partner, and your couple within the partner yoga practice?”
- (3) “Given everything that you have experienced and shared, what do you think might be understood of what partner yoga actually is, and what that could mean?”
- (4) “What did you get out of this study? What did you like? Overall, what were the challenges of this study? What did you dislike?”
- (5) “What happened in the days following the workshops? Did you notice any lingering effects of any sort?”
- (6) “Might you continue to practice partner yoga after this study?”
- (7) “How was the program structure, i.e.: workshop logistics and format, interview? Anything that worked well? Anything you would change?”
- (8) “Is there anything else about this study or your experience of it as a whole or in part that you would like to share?”