In the Making

From Me to We:

A Phenomenological Inquiry into Coherence

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Abstract

Groups play a pivotal role in human lives and may be even more important at this current moment when the human species faces myriad intractable issues. It could be argued that groups that are able to form tight connections may be needed now more than ever. While many empirical studies of groups focus on group performance, productivity, and effectiveness, or group "doingness," this paper introduces a recent study that explored group "beingness" and the experience of manifesting deep union and oneness, an intersubjective phenomenon called coherence. Coherence has been written about from a theoretical and conceptual perspective, as well as from a practice perspective, but it has rarely been investigated empirically. An interpretive phenomenological investigation of coherence inquired into the phenomenon through the facilitation of two group coherence sessions immediately followed by group interviews. The study's design aimed to explore coherence from the intersubjective perspective, allowing participants to make meaning of their coherence experiences in community. This paper introduces the study and its findings and posits the importance of this type of group phenomenon in our current human reality.

Keywords

coherence, co-sensing, intersubjective, group development, beingness, ways of knowing

Introduction

The relational dimension of awareness-based systems change cannot be underestimated. In my 20 years as a facilitator, ten years as a meditation and mindfulness teacher, and over the course of my many decades of personal and spiritual development, I have worked with and in all types of social systems. These systems, made up of a wide variety of memberships, share both the joy and difficulty of being in community. The joys are seen in rich connections, smiles, laughter, and tears. For me, the positive aspects of membership in social systems across the board have been elevating and life-affirming. As most of the social systems with which I've been affiliated have shared some aspects of positivity, they have without exception also faced some kind of challenge or difficulty.

Our memberships in groups can bring us joy that can be found in the collective effervescence we experience in crowds when we feel a union, joy, and confidence borne out of being in a group (Páez et al., 2015). Joy can be found in experiences of cohesion and synchrony, when we are metaphorically glued together (Nelson & Quick, 2007) and literally in sync with each other (Reddish et al., 2013). And that joy may be found in an emerging concept called *coherence* (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016; Steininger & Debold, forthcoming; Vervaeke, 2019), when members of a group are able to cross a threshold (Yorks, 2005) into a shared field (Brabant & DiPerna, 2016; Gunnlaugson, 2011, 2016; Steininger & Debold, 2016) to experience a oneness that has been described as magical (Briskin et al., 2001; Levi, 2003).

While the joy we feel in communion with other human begins may be something we seek, in the world today, it may feel as though the difficulty we experience in groups is more commonplace. One need only look to the U.S. Congress to see how challenging it is to find common ground on complex issues that are politically and socially charged. Polarization and discordance within groups, small and large, are very much part of our VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) global environment. And yet, effective, cohered groups may be exactly what is needed in this moment of our evolution as a human species.

During my recent doctoral education, I was drawn to groups as my focus of study, and I turned to explore phenomena related to peak collective experiences. During this time, I learned about coherence, a group phenomenon being

discussed in integral communities,[1] Presencing Institute communities,[2] and within platforms like Rebel Wisdom.[3] In these communities, coherence was spoken of conceptually and experientially, but it did not appear to have been studied empirically in any kind of extensive or rigorous way. Coherence is something I believe I have experienced with these groups and others as a magical connection and oneness that is both difficult to explain and at the same time strangely accessible. These experiences during which the groups I was part of transformed into something clear and focused out of chaos made me wonder if this kind of group phenomenon may help us, as a human species, to begin tackling the many intractable issues we face.

The ability of groups to address the increasing complexity of the world and the destructive forces at play has never been more important than it is now. As a species, we face myriad intractable issues. As Dossey and Dossey (2020) explained:

> Our species has tried to secede from nature, and we have failed. In doing so, we have misconstrued the nature of our own consciousness, our connectedness to one another, and our relationship to all sentient life. Something is missing in modern life. We are starved for vision. We hunger for a culture that transcends the suffocating narrowness and intellectual strangulation caused by prejudice, bigotry, greed, and crass materialism that threaten our future. We yearn for connections. (p. 122)

Indeed, something is missing. We cannot figure out what that something is in isolation. We must find ways to work and be together that bring out our individual and collective best, and those ways must be different from our traditional linear processes of problem-solving.

> There is a growing recognition that the sole reliance on linear thought processes, cognitive reasoning, and behavioral protocols is inadequate for addressing the complex, interrelated challenges we face today. We need radically new approaches that are responsive, adaptive, and participatory and that can help us evolve in how we relate to and care for each other, the natural world, and all forms and expressions of life. (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021, p. 102)

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[1] For example, in the late Terry Patten's New Republic of the Heart (https://newrepublicoftheheart.org/person/terry-patten/).

[2] As part of the Presencing Institute's GAIA Journey in 2020 (https://www.u-school.org/offerings/gaia-recordings), I was part of a small group interested in exploring coherence.

[3] Although Rebel Wisdom's work is coming to an end, the platform (https://rebelwisdom.co.uk/) containing videos, several of which discuss coherence, continues.

As Einstein said (New York Times, 1946), "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels" (p. 11). Could this group phenomenon of coherence be that new type of thinking?

This paper aims to discuss the study of the group phenomenon of coherence through a discussion of relevant constructs, the study's methodology and design, and then through an overview of findings.

Intersubjectivity, Beingness, and Coherence

This inquiry was rooted in the philosophical and psychological construct of intersubjectivity. Coherence is a phenomenon that appears to occur between and among groups of people, and in this study, occurred through a sense of being instead of centering on a group goal, activity, or project. Therefore, the following key concepts hold a central focus: 1. intersubjectivity 2. Coherence, and 3. Beingness, particularly Group Beingness.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity can be considered, metaphorically, as the space between two subjects. Philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) explained that the space between two people, for example, is a unique entity that is neither one person, nor the other, but instead an entity unto itself (Buber, 1947/2002). He described a conversation between two people as taking place between them "in the most precise sense, as it were in a dimension which is accessible only to them both" (p. 241). He explained that there "is a remainder, somewhere, where the souls end and the world has not yet begun" (p. 242) that happens in the interrelatedness of two people, two souls. He elucidated intersubjectivity as something that "is not to be grasped on the basis of the ontic personal existence, or of that of two personal existences, but of that which has its being between them, and transcends both…where *I* and *Thou* meet, there is a realm of 'between'" (p. 243).

De Quincy (2000) explained that relational experiences are "the most vital manifestations of consciousness" (p. 135) and defined intersubjectivity as:

> Mutual co-arising and engagement of interdependent subjects, which creates their respective experience. It is ontological. Strong or ontological intersubjectivity relies on cocreative nonphysical presence and brings distinct subjects into being out of a prior matrix of relationships. (p. 138)

De Quincy's definition speaks to the socially constructed nature of reality, where I am who I am, because of my experience and relations with other people. It is through you that I see myself, and likewise, you are you, because of my interaction and shared experience of consciousness with you. Not only do we co-create our experience, but I am also a compilation of all of the previous experiences I have had with others, as are you.

Intersubjectivity is "the shared inner dimension," which "is represented spatially as between us (2nd person position), in contrast to inside us (subjective or 1st person position) or outside us (objective or 3rd person position)" (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016, p. 12). Intersubjectivity is "based on the notion of 'we-ness,' that we are always selves-in-relation-to-others" (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016, p. 54) and is "where the lifeworld is situated in a web of collectively evolving relationships" (Scharmer, 2016, p. 95). Not only, then, is intersubjectivity an element "between us," as Buber (1947/2002) explained, but is also a shared internal state.

Siegel (2006) added a neuropsychological element to our intersubjective experience, which he called "interpersonal neurobiology" (p. 248), and explained that we neurochemically entrain with each other through the mirror neurons system. Research has revealed that "the brain is capable of integrating perceptual learning with motor action to create internal representations of intentional states in others" (p. 254). According to Siegel, there is a physical, embodied component to intersubjectivity. Surrey (2005) explained that our "inner world is constituted through interaction with the interpersonal world, both in the course of early development and in ongoing, real-time contact with others" (p. 95). Plainly stated, our health and well-being are derived from our interaction with other people. "Intersubjective experience is, to varying degrees, an empathic experience in which we consider how others are experiencing the world and attempt to see through their eyes, walk in their shoes," according to Gunnlaugson et al. (2017, p. ix).

The space where intersubjects co-arise is the field, called by some the intersubjective field (Brabant & DiPerna, 2016; Gunnlaugson, 2011, 2016; Steininger & Debold, 2016) and also referred to as the social field (Scharmer, 2016). In integral communities, it is the "We-space" (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016). The field can be characterized as a "larger tide of living intelligence" (Patten, 2010, para. 3) that arises through us and as "a shared field of attention where the collective can become an entity itself," sharing "awareness of our connectedness, our interweaving" (Baeck, 2016, para. 3). Experience itself is "seen to emerge out of interactions within the intersubjective field (past and present relationships" (Finlay, 2009, p. 3). The concept of *We-space* originated from Wilber's Lower Left quadrant of his Four Quadrant model where collective forms of consciousness reside (Wilber, 1997). *We-space* emerged from integral communities engaging in collective practices to explore collective stage development (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016).

Beingness and Group Beingness

This study was situated in group beingness vis a vis group doingness, which is not a term that is in public discourse but instead is a created term meant to encompass mainstream research on groups focused on productivity, performance, and efficiency. In contrast, beingness is "who we are in the world" (Studdert, 2016) and is closely connected to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or Being-in-the-

world, which is the activity of existence (Wheeler, 2020). Group beingness, then, shifts the focus from individual being in the world to a collective experience of being alive and existing. Communal (or group) beingness is "the outcome of constant sociality enacted in common and created and sustained in common through the inter-relational linking of action, materiality, subjectivity, speech and the world of accepted meanings" (Studdert, 2016, p. 622). Studdert's definition is a complement to de Quincy's (2000) explanation of intersubjectivity, and indeed, the two are overlapping and corresponding concepts. Most importantly, the term group beingness is not focused on the entity's performance and productivity and instead, is more aligned with who the group is at its core.

Coherence

Coherence, in the context of this paper and study, describes two or more people forming a deep bond and connection through consciousness. Coherence is a "sense of 'communion'—being together in sacred union" that people who have experienced the phenomenon have described as the "deepest experience of connection" that is a "felt sense of nonseparation, belonging, and profound attunement with the others in [a] group" (Steininger & Debold, forthcoming, p. 12). They continued, "From the perspective of the group, coherence integrates the participants into a whole that can then begin to tap into a shared intelligence and awareness" (Steininger & Debold, forthcoming, p. 13). Psychologist John Vervaeke called coherence "a kind of communitas…directed toward engaging the collective intelligence of distributed cognition" (2019, 52:33). It is a coming together of two or more people at the deepest level of experience.

Coherence has been likened to a group flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Salanova et al., 2014), but flow without the association of task, doingness, or content (Rebel Wisdom, 2019). Others have described coherence as a shared sense of support and well-being (Glickman & Boyar, 2016), internal alignment and optimized group energy (Hamilton et al., 2016), shared heart intelligence (Patten, 2016), and a sense that everything has settled into place (Steininger & Debold, 2016). Using spiritual language, coherence could be explained as the experience of oneness and non-duality, either through an altered state or through the felt sense of oneness (or both). To enter a state of coherence, practitioners have written about a shift occurring (Briskin et al., 2001; Caspari & Schilling, 2016). The shift may be experienced as a "higher level of order that comes into the room…a kind of group intuition" (Hamilton, 2004, p. 58), the crossing of a threshold (Yorks, 2005), or a contraction of the group container (Levi, 2003).

HeartMath's conceptualization of social coherence surfaces the importance of emotional and social connectedness among participants as a key component of coherence. McCraty (2017) explained that social coherence:

> …is reflected by stable and harmonious relationships, which
> allows for the efficient flow and utilization of energy and
> communication required for optimal collective cohesion and action.
> Social coherence requires that group members are attuned and are

emotionally connected with each other, and that the group's emotional energy is organized and regulated by the group as a whole. (p. 1)

From my empirical study of coherence, I developed the following definition of coherence:

A group-level phenomenon wherein members experience a collective shift into a heightened state of connectedness marked by a quieting, slowing, and calming of the group climate, an activation of an enlivened intersubjective field, and a calling forth for members' best selves resulting in an acceptance and celebration of differences among members. The shift is aided by skillful means, and members are able to process and make sense of the experience through somatic, emotional, spiritual, and creative ways of knowing. (Guenther, 2022, p. 169)

Coherence is an intersubjective phenomenon that seems to be rooted in who a group is in its beingness as opposed to its work toward task and goal completion.

In the next section, I will outline the empirical study of coherence in the intersubjective field.

From Theoretical to Empirical

Although the phenomenon of coherence has been discussed conceptually and theoretically (see Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016), it has rarely been studied empirically. Even when a group phenomenon like coherence has been studied empirically (Briskin et al., 2001; Levi, 2003), the methods used to study the phenomenon have been primarily from first- (*me*) and third-person (*it*) perspectives versus from the second-person (*we*) position. Ideally, the study of an intersubjective phenomenon would be investigated from the first- and second-person position, thereby providing a means for the first-person experience to be corroborated by the *we*.

The phenomenologists never conceive of intersubjectivity as an objectively existing structure in the world which can be described and analyzed from a third-person perspective. On the contrary, intersubjectivity is a relation between subjects which must be analyzed from a first-person and a second-person perspective. It is precisely such an analysis that will reveal the fundamental significance of intersubjectivity. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity are in fact complementing and mutually interdependent notions. (Zahavi, 2001, p. 166)

The relative absence of literature on the empirical study of coherence from the first- and second-person perspectives provided an opportunity to do just that: investigate coherence through a group process.

The few previous studies in this area (Briskin et al., 2001; Levi, 2003) were conducted using retrospective interviewing with individuals who recounted experiences of group resonance and group magic. Funded by the Fetzer Institute, Briskin et al. (2001) interviewed 61 professional facilitators and consultants, many of whom are well-known in the field, to inquire into moments when groups began to function harmoniously and fluidly. Their findings highlighted eight elements of fluid, harmonious group experiences, including synchronicity, alchemy, movement to the whole, and love, as well as six outcomes, including connectedness and healing. Levi's (2003) dissertation study sought to explore the phenomena of collective resonance, which she named *group magic*. She interviewed 34 individuals who believed they had experienced moments of collective resonance. Her findings named what group magic was like with 14 characteristics including connection to others and an energy field, as well as how the experiences happened with seven contributing factors that included silence, storytelling, and spirit.

Methodology

I chose phenomenology as the methodological approach to investigate the lived experience of coherence. The term phenomenology has multiple meanings: it is a philosophical movement (Gill, 2014), a general term for qualitative methodologies (Smith et al., 2009), and a methodology in and of itself. For the purposes of this paper, the term is used to name the methodology, phenomenology, used in this study. Phenomenology is a methodology that "thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness…and…refers to the totality of lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997, p. 2).

Two primary traditions are found within the methodology of phenomenology: descriptive and interpretive (Gill, 2014). I locate my research within the interpretive phenomenology tradition. Where the descriptivist tradition focuses on phenomenology from an epistemological standpoint, interpretivist phenomenology is more interested in the beingness of entities, and therefore, gravitates toward the ontological perspective of phenomenology (Gill, 2014). This emphasis on beingness formed a resonant basis for the study. Additionally, because group coherence may be somewhat elusive and fungible, the tone and tenor change of the experience may shift depending on who is experiencing it. In that light, interpretive phenomenology, which accepts that interpretation is a part of analysis (Smith et al., 2009), was better aligned with my study.

Participants

Two criteria guided participant recruitment. First, I sought small groups with members from the same organizations. I posited that shared organizational rituals, such as meditation and language, could ease the period of group formation during the facilitated sessions as well as provide language for what could be a challenging phenomenon to discuss. The members did not need to

know each other personally; instead, a shared context could bring familiarity to an unfamiliar process. Potential downsides of not attending to this dynamic of group formation could result in discontent, uncertainty, and preoccupation with members finding their places in the group (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). Second, participants each had an active or previous committed meditation or contemplative practice. The participants' practices increased the likelihood that they would have an awareness of their own states of consciousness and be able to intentionally shift with the group.

To recruit the small groups, I contacted approximately 15 leaders in my network who were involved in facilitating and leading spiritual development in some way. I requested that they recruit small groups from their organizations to participate in my study. From the 15 leaders contacted, five replied to my request expressing interest and a willingness to explore forming a group from their organizations. Of those five leaders, two were able to form a small group and find a date for me to work with the group. One group was formed by the director of a coach-training program, and the other group was formed by the director of a personal and spiritual development training organization. Neither organization worked explicitly with coherence as a concept. One of the small groups was populated by members who all knew each other well. The second small group included members from two different cohorts of a coach-training program, so they did not all know each other before the facilitated session. All of the 13 participants reported a robust, daily current or past meditation or contemplative practice. Participants are detailed in Table 1.

Group 1				Group 2			
Participant Number	*Age*	*Race/ Ethnicity*	*Gender*	*Participant Number*	*Age*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Gender*
1A	55–64	White	Female	2A	30–39	White	Male
1B	65–74	White	Female	2B	55–64	White	Female
1C	18–29	Latina	Female	2C	45–54	African American	Female
1D	45–54	White	Female	2D	55–64	White	Female
1E	55–64	White	Female	2E	55–64	African American/ Multiracial	Female
1F	45–54	White	Female	2F	45–54	South Asian/Indian	Female
				2G	45–54	White	Female

Table 1: Coherence Study Participants.

Facilitated Coherence Sessions

Where the few previous studies on similar phenomena utilize retrospective interviewing methods, as stated previously, this study's design and method

focused on studying this phenomenon intersubjectively and experientially. As such, participants were recruited based on their perceived potential to enter coherence. The study's design centered on two small groups each participating in a day-long session that I facilitated. The sessions were intended to move each group toward coherence. Both facilitated sessions were followed immediately by group interviews providing participants with the opportunity to share and discuss their experiences with their groups soon after the experiential elements.

My use of a research design embedded in a relational ontology enabled me to get closer to the phenomenon of interest (Storberg-Walker, 2022). Storberg-Walker (2022) explained this act of getting closer to one's phenomenon of interest as a "deep interdependence and co-creation of reality" (p. 4). She explained relational ontology as a new way of approaching research:

> This requires a shift in consciousness—from consciousness of separation to a new way of being in the world that recognizes the interdependence and dependent origination of all of the material world. (p. 5)

Prior to the sessions, members of the group received an email that contained instructions for the sessions, including the purpose of the sessions and how to use Zoom (for example, turning off self-view, not using artificial backgrounds, ensuring good lighting and sound); a brief explanation of the phenomenon being studied, *coherence*; a pre-session questionnaire inquiring into participants' previous experience with coherence; and informed consent forms. The coherence overview and pre-session questionnaire were intended to "prime the pump." Because I was inquiring into the lived experience of coherence and not whether or not coherence was a phenomenon, orienting participants toward the phenomenon had the potential of opening their minds to what was possible within the facilitated session.

Each of the two small groups participated in one full-day session, and the agenda for both of those sessions are included in Table 2. The sessions included a series of meditative practices, activities, and dialogue intended to create conditions in which a group could enter coherence. Because coherence can be elusive (Brabant & DiPerna, 2016; Cox, 2014; Guttenstein et al., 2014; Yorks, 2005), entering coherence was not guaranteed. Acknowledging this, the session was designed with successive practices, dialogue, and interactions meant to take the group deeper into silence and stillness together.

Run Time	Element
:15 minutes	Welcome and Opening
:15	Opening meditation and gazing practices
:20	Check-in
:30	Activity: Consciousness shifting
:10	Break

:60	Shared intention setting, meditation practice, and discussion
:30	Lunch break
:20	Art project
:10	Meditation practice
:40	Sharing art and storytelling – "show and tell"
:10	Closing and checking out using art cards and storytelling
:10	Break
2:00	Group interview

Table 2: Facilitated Session Agenda

An arts-based method, in this study called the *art project*, invited participants to engage in sensemaking through the artistic medium of their choosing. Prompted by instructions for participants to use art to convey what the session was like for them as a member of the group, some participants chose photos or art that spoke to their experiences. Others drew or painted pieces. One participant shared a poem she had written, another played a song that resonated with her, and still another sang a song. This arts-based method was included to assist with translating the inner experience into language, which can be difficult (Higgs, 2008). Additionally, the sharing of art has been noted to increase rapport and resonance in groups (Warren, 2009), which I found to be the case here. As one participant explained, "This exercise is so indicative of our different ways of sharing creatively our experience, yet there's all these commonalities." They went on to describe the commonalities, which seemed to have allowed the entire group to see the shared aspects of the encounter.

The timing of the study during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that the study be conducted in a virtual environment. Activities were based on online and facilitative practices from One World in Dialogue[4] as well as from the Presencing Institute,[5] Liberating Structures,[6] and Lynne McTaggart (2017).

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[4] Thomas Steininger and Elizabeth Debold of One World in Dialogue (https://oneworldindialogue.com/) offer training as well as salons and practice sessions focused on creating deep connections.

[5] The Presencing Institute holds a wide variety of convenings and trainings, including one course called Digital Leadership aimed at cultivating dynamic offerings in a virtual environment (https://www.u-school.org/learning-modules#sp-digital-leadership).

[6] Originators Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless offer a multitude of creative facilitation practices through what they have named liberating structures (https://www.liberatingstructures.com/).

Data Collection

The group interviews held immediately after the facilitated sessions were semi-structured and designed to allow the participants to do the majority of the talking. Questions were asked about what the experience was like, whether they had a sense if others within the group had similar experiences, and if and how the group changed throughout their time together. Two brief follow-up questionnaires were completed, the first one week after the sessions and the second three weeks after the sessions. Each questionnaire included open-ended questions that inquired into perspectives on the experience as well as probing into comments made during the group interviews. Questions from the group interviews and questionnaires are included in the appendix.

Analysis

The data under consideration were stories and sharing from the art project, interview comments, and questionnaire responses. Data analysis was based upon the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process outlined by Smith (Smith et al., 2009) beginning with reading and re-reading transcripts and questionnaire responses, noting,[7] developing themes, searching for connections of themes, looking for patterns, and then repeating the process several times. This process, a version of the hermeneutic circle developed by Heidegger and then expanded by Gadamer (2013), allowed for the ongoing development of interpretation and understanding (Vagle, 2018).

By engaging in the circular process of looking at the line-by-line data, stepping back and taking in the data as a whole, and then going back to the details and back to the whole again repeatedly, I was able to see the data from different angles and at a number of levels. According to Donaldson and Harter (2019), one must complete the hermeneutic circle "to understand and have a contextual reference of the whole to understand the parts while simultaneously having an understanding and contextual reference to the parts to understand the whole" (p. 10). The circle is "concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). Whereas qualitative analysis tends to be presented and engaged linearly, interpretive phenomenological analysis involves moving back and forth "through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step, one after the other" (p. 28). In other words, my analysis involved line-by-line review while at the same time holding awareness of the whole of the data and likewise, analyzing the whole of the data while holding

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[7] An IPA method much like memoing, noting is researcher's notes on the transcripts and questionnaires (Smith et al., 2009).

awareness of the details. As Smith explained, it was not a linear process, but rather, made space for the "data to speak" and findings to emerge.

Concurrent with my analysis, a separate team of volunteers conducted a line-by-line analysis of the data which allowed me to triangulate my perceptions of the salient themes with other perspectives on the data set.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, the primary limitation being the small size of the study. Additionally, the study captured only a day in the life of two groups of people, both of which had no formal purpose, structure, or future plans. The participants came together as two groups for the purposes of this study. This is relevant because group dynamics can become more complicated over time as individual agendas, preferences, and relationships shift and evolve. Additional research on a larger scale studying a group's coherence over time may allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

As with most qualitative studies, it was not my intention to produce generalizable findings. However, readers may experience *naturalistic generalization*, meaning they may find that some of the descriptions and findings shared here may resonate with their own experiences (Mills et al., 2010).

Findings: Lived Experience of the Intersubjective Field

The sessions described in this study were designed to create the conditions for group coherence, as has been described above. The data collected through interviews and follow-up questionnaires aimed to access the inner and intersubjective nature of the experience. The analysis of the data collected as part of this study resulted in 18 components of coherence organized into four categories: What It Was Like, How It Happened, Antecedents, and Outcomes. In the space available, I will provide an overview of select components of coherence in lieu of a detailed report of findings.

Components of Coherence

Sense of Connection

When asked what the experience was like, participants often reported a sense of connection to other participants and to themselves throughout the groups' time together. One participant said, "I felt a level of wholeness and a deep level of connection that felt very good in my heart." Another explained in her art project, "We are souls connected." And yet another participant was surprised to feel the depth that she felt. She said, "I really wasn't expecting the connectivity that I felt today, and it was an awesome experience." Likewise, one participant found the

sense of communion unusual. "I've never been part of a circle of people I just met where there's so much connection." He went on to explain:

> I feel like when we came into the space, we were all gifted with a note, and it was the only note that you had. And we all had a handbell or something. And Stacey, you invited us in, and you encouraged us, and you just banged our notes. And we felt the reverberations of our energy of maybe a note or a song that we forgot we had. And we were just feeling that, and we were like, oh my gosh, I have a note . . . and you have a note. And then we were all describing what we were feeling, and at one point, we made that intention, and it was like we put all our notes together for a brief and powerful time. And there was a beautiful harmony that played in that moment, like one song that only we could have played in this moment together. And it resonated, and it was powerful. (Quotation from Research Participant, 2021)

Inclusivity, Acceptance, and 'Best Selves'

A theme of accepting differences and being inclusive was a repeating topic for both groups. In one group a participant said, "I felt drawn to the field as an equal and valued person." And another said that the experience was "powerful, uplifting, and a feeling that the connection made was truly from the heart with everyone's best interests in mind—no judgments, just respect and happiness for each other."

In the second group, the members reported being able to be their full selves and still feel accepted by the group. One member described an envisioned world where "human skin structure was disappearing and seeking evolution." Another member said:

> This is probably one of the first groups where I felt that everyone in the group was very accepting of all our differences. That's an awesome experience. We were all different. And I wasn't feeling like, for the first time, that one of us doesn't belong, and it's me. I felt like, wow, we're all different, and it's okay. This is my dream world. (Quotation from Research Participant, 2021)

With the accepting and connecting aspects of coherence, participants shared that they noticed authenticity and the best parts of themselves and other members of the group manifesting in the phenomenon. A participant talked about the aspect of supporting each other's authentic selves being part of the encounter. She said, "We're all individuals, but we're part of the group. That's the best part [of the experience]—that we can all be individuals who were part of the group." Another participant, as part of the art project, talked about "the bounty of…diversity, and…just allowing everyone to bring their special gifts." One participant replied when asked what the members thought had happened

with the group during the session, "We brought each other's higher selves forward. Our selves, best selves."

Nature of the Intersubjective Field

The experience can be thought of as taking part in the intersubjective field, much like a playing field in sports. And like a playing field, the intersubjective field was experienced by its occupants as having certain energy and characteristics. A participant noticed the "shifting energy in the group," and another characterized the unique energy to the group as an energy fingerprint: "this individual fingerprint, like…energy print that we have." Through the practices and activities, participants noticed shifting energy. A participant said, "The gazing gave me the opportunity to carry a little bit of everybody's energy in me and trust that they carried a little bit of my energy in them, so that started to build us as an energetic group energy." She continued, "The energy was strong—I could feel that network, the weaving, happening." In the first group, one participant described the energy in the field as a "vortex," and another said it was "moving. It is circulating. It is vibrating." In the second group, a participant named the energy in the field a "pulsing of this common heartbeat." The outcome of being in the field created both shared and individual manifestations of energy and aspects of quieting, calming, flowing, slowing, deepening, and becoming clear. One participant explained that "it was a soft flowing," and another said, it was "like gently being held." A participant described the energy as "peacefully calm and cool," and another noticed that "the jumble became really quieted". *Energy* was the most frequently appearing theme in the study.

Drawing on Multiple Intelligences

How participants made sense of the phenomenon, how they knew something had happened collectively, and how they translated the experience into language seemed to be supported by using intelligences that went beyond intellect. One participant explained this activation of different ways of knowing:

> What I noticed was how I was experiencing our activities and the group somatically and analytically; i.e., I was in touch with the feelings, sensations, emotions (my somatic and heart intelligences), as well as with both sides of my mind wisdom—the analytical left brain intelligence and the intuitive, creative wisdom of the right brain. (Quotation from Research Participant, 2021)

Another described "somatic sensing and feeling for me made me very aware of how different this experience was."

Several participants spoke of transcendence of the group's way of knowing and understanding. For instance, one participant said, "I could sense and feel within our collective that we were having similar thoughts and images," revealing an awareness tuned into the collective's experience. Another

participant declared that they "felt alive," because they saw that another participant is feeling alive, indicating positive affect as emotional contagion. Two other participants reported that what others in their group were describing as visualizations, sensations, and impressions that came during meditation were very similar to what they experienced during the same practice. The participants' statements suggested that there is also a heightened state of connectedness among group members that went beyond a feeling of closeness, perhaps indicating collective wisdom. Collective wisdom is a "transformative shift that affects both inner awareness and outer behavior" (Briskin et al., 2009, p. 32) and is "neither of the intellect alone nor of any individual" (p. 27).

Sense of Trust

Trust, choice, and courage allowed the individual members of both groups to fully engage and enter a shared state. A participant said, "What bolsters my courage is the trust I have in the group members, facilitator, and process…I made an intentional choice to share my feelings and insights and to trust that I could do so without judgment." The trust resulted in an opening for authenticity. "There's no fear. We could be who we are individually in a collective gathering without fear of judgment," one participant explained. Another added, "I think it not only took trust and courage but also practice and humility."

Experiencing a Shift

Groups were asked explicitly if they experienced a change or *shift* in the group during the session. Both groups both agreed that a shift had occurred. In writings, this shift is sometimes referred to as the transition from me to we. One participant described shifting.

> Coming in…it was about the curiosity, and the curiosity is kind of like a palpitation. The embodiment is a quickened heartbeat, this kind of giddiness that it's something new. The shift, for me, is when it switches into my belly, and it feels like butterflies, because there is an energetic and a spiritual shift that begins to happen and emerge, and everything begins to sit within that space, because energy is rising and flowing in a different way. So the palpitations actually stop in terms of quickened heartbeat of the excitement and curiosity of something new. And then there is a fluttering that begins to happen, along with a warmth within that shares that this is an emotional or spiritual shift or change that is happening with the energy in the space. (Quotation from Research Participant, 2021)

Another participant said, "We all just went into the field and flowed with it." Still another called the connection a "coming together in harmony" and her art, as she explained it, included "colorfulness, playfulness, open sky possibilities" of

connecting, while "allowing everyone to bring their special gift." A fellow participant agreed and added, "Our energy, our combined energy flowing together independent of space and time, magnified." Another continued, "I felt my own personal container enlarge as our group container expanded to welcome and hold all of us."

Entering a State of Coherence

The facilitated sessions were designed to create the possibility of coherence, but coherence was not guaranteed. A key question for consideration was this: did the two groups experience coherence? As discussed above, coherence is thought to involve a shift of some kind from normal functioning into a quieter, calmer, more connected energy. Shifting into coherence is described as having a unifying effect, moving the group from a set of individuals in a group to a cohered whole sharing some degree of consciousness. This shift is palpable and is felt as "some kind of higher level of order that comes into the room, and it's very noticeable to people" (Hamilton, 2004, p. 58).

When I asked the groups if they noticed any kind of shift or transition into their reported connectedness, both groups agreed that they noticed that something had changed. The following is an excerpt from the transcripts during which one of the groups is discussing when that change occurred.

> **Participant 1:** …I knew it happened as soon as we started to do the heart linking through the meditation. And it continued to build.
>
> **Participant 2:** Kind of the same for me…
>
> Facilitator/Researcher: Was that before the gazing8 and during the meditation
>
> **Participant 2:** Yes, it was
>
> **Participant 3:** For me, it was the experience of the gazing
>
> **Participant 4:** Yeah, it was the gazing
>
> **Participant 5:** Definitely the gazing was very powerful…

In addition to the reports of the presence of shifting energy and climate, aspects of coherence, which were explicated earlier in this article were revealed in participants' comments and accounts of their experiences. A "sense of 'communion'" (Steininger & Debold, forthcoming, p. 12) and "a kind of communitas" (Vervaeke, 2019, 52:33) were reflected in participants' descriptions of feeling connected. "Shared heart intelligence" (Patten, 2016) was reflected in

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8 A gazing practice, developed by Thomas Steininger and Elizabeth Debold of One World in Dialogue, invited participants, with Zoom video feed on, to gaze deeply at each other while inviting a heartfelt connection.

participants' comments such as, "There was an interconnectedness that happened at the heart level, at all the levels of my being. I just was in this place of oneness, full of love and connectedness." One participant described a feeling of positive affect and well-being, explaining, "We caught the rainbow." She later explained, "When I think of a rainbow, I think of unity and harmony…I was hoping that all living things could live in unity and harmony." This sense of unity and harmony may indicate a shared sense of support and well-being (Glickman & Boyar, 2016) as well as internal alignment (Hamilton et al., 2016). Taken together, the data may indicate that both groups entered a heightened state of connection and union, which aligns with descriptions of coherence.

Discussion

Coherence and phenomena like coherence are often talked about as a *something* that happened but rarely is that *something* named. That *something* is in my view quite significant. It is at once an ethereal and ineffable phenomenon, and it is also quite often one that is ephemeral, difficult to hold on to, and one that makes those who experience it question whether in fact the experience even occurred. For both of the groups that I studied, that *something* was apparent during one of the session activities, the intention activity, when participants reported hearing other members of the group share their visualizations from within the intention meditation that were the same visualizations they themselves had experienced. Repeatedly, several members reported being ready to share an experience with the group only to have that same sharing come from another member of the group first. While these types of experiences are sometimes spoken about as psychic and psi[9] phenomena, I believe that naming evokes an anomalous connotation that does not fit.

My research suggests that these types of experiences are actually quite accessible and that you do not need a psychic gift, a special visitation, or any other type of otherworldly capability to experience shared consciousness in an intersubjective field. This study may reveal that access may be available to anyone willing to commit to cultivating their awareness, which can be accomplished through a consistent daily meditation practice, an openness to that which is unseen, and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) that allows you to believe that more is possible than can be proven through traditional measures.

Even so, I invite caution for those interested in facilitating these types of experiences. For researchers and practitioners who would like to begin working with groups and teams to cultivate heightened states of group beingness, I recommend that the first step be to engage in one's own path of personal and spiritual development. Anyone who wants to lead or facilitate these kinds of

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[9] According to Dean Radin (2018), psi is another named for psychic phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis.

experiences should have a committed personal practice, several years of experience participating in and being a part of these types of phenomena, and should also be very clear about their intention regarding cultivating we-spaces. Coherence and other group phenomena are not tools meant to be used for increasing productivity and profitability. Those intentions run counter to what these experiences are about. Instead, these practices help to make the world a better place by reminding people of who they are through deep connection and by widening their views of reality and what is possible.

The study of coherence in the intersubjective field was intended to provide an opportunity to inquire into a phenomenon that has been presented conceptually and from a practice standpoint, but one that has not frequently been studied empirically. When phenomena like coherence have been studied in the past, retrospective methods, such as interviewing participants who were remembering magical group experiences, have been employed (Briskin et al., 2001; Levi, 2003). The study discussed in this paper may be just the beginning of an area of inquiry that could broadly expand our understanding of coherence. Additional studies are needed to further this area of research. Variations in participant recruitment, study size, and how coherence is engaged would continue the exploration of coherence and other group-level phenomena.

In our current collective reality and time of poly-crisis, our ability to join together in ways that are life-affirming, positive, and accepting of difference is crucial in the quest to work toward solutions to these crises. Learning more about group phenomena such as coherence may aid in that quest. The empirical study of these phenomena is possible and warrants our time and attention as researchers. Not too long ago, I am confident that a dissertation committee would not have entertained such an inquiry for a doctoral dissertation. As we evolve in our abilities as human beings, as demonstrated in our capacity to experience coherence, should we not also evolve our thinking about what is possible and what is important in terms of empirical study?

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