

I feel I can live every minute if I choose to’’: participants’ experience of a positive mindfulness programme

Qualitative Research in Psychology

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Abstract

Both separately and in conjunction, mindfulness and positive psychological interventions have been found to increase wellbeing against a number of measures. Research has been primarily based upon the application of self-report scales, and little has yet been done to examine the lived experience of participants. The aim of this study therefore was to apply an interpretative phenomenological approach to the experience of participants in a Mindfulness Based Flourishing (MBF) programme which combines positive psychological interventions with mindfulness, in order to more fully understand the scope and depth of the impact their experience had on them. Three participants from a completed MBF each had a one-off semi-structured interview, the results of which were transcribed verbatim. The resulting texts were analysed, with five themes emerging which demonstrated the impact the programme had had on participants’ sense of self and on the nature of their connections with others. While all participants identified benefits accruing from the course, it also presented challenges emotionally as well as in terms of the embedding of knowledge and skills. Future research should look to examine the impact of such programmes in wider cultural and temporal frameworks, and additionally should explore the application of Grounded Theory to identify more theoretical level explanations of phenomenon.

Keywords: [Mindfulness](#), [Positive Psychology](#), [wellbeing](#), [Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis](#), [identity](#)

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Introduction

The past 20 years has witnessed significant research into both the theoretical underpinnings of the field that has come to be known as Positive Psychology (PP). Its proximate origins can be found in preceding fields such as humanistic and existential psychology, and related disciplines like psychotherapy. Indeed, some critical theorists have suggested that positive

psychology is essentially just a modern incarnation of humanistic psychology (Robbins, [2008](#) Robbins, B. D. (2008). What is the good life? Positive psychology and the renaissance of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36(2), 96–112. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]) – or even simply a ‘re-branding’ if one was being uncharitable) – although others have identified key differences, e.g., with respect to ontology, epistemology, and practical applications (Waterman, [2013](#) Waterman, A. S. (2013). The humanistic psychology–positive psychology divide: Contrasts in philosophical foundations. *American Psychologist*, 68(3), 124–133. [[Crossref](#)], [[PubMed](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]). In any case, these preceding fields certainly influenced and paved the way for PP, including with respect to concepts and practical applications designed to give substance to its aim of making life better (Lomas, Hefferon, & Ivtzan, [2014](#) Lomas, T., Hefferon, K., & Ivtzan, I. (2014). *Applied Positive Psychology: Integrated Positive Practice*. SAGE Publications. [[Crossref](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]). In seeking ways to support people flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, [2000](#) Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihaly, M. (2000). American Psychologist: Special Issue on Happiness, Excellence, and Optimal Human Functioning. *American Psychologist*. [[Google Scholar](#)]), Positive Psychology has, and in an increasingly sophisticated manner (Ivtzan, Lomas, Worth, & Hefferon, [2015](#) Ivtzan, I., Lomas, T., Worth, P., and Hefferon, K. (2015). *Second Wave Positive Psychology: Embracing the Dark Side of Life*. Routledge. [[Google Scholar](#)]) looked to address wellbeing in all its complexity. Consequently, several key concepts and processes have been identified as central to facilitating the conditions for flourishing.

The cultivation of positive emotions for example, has been shown to make people feel better in the moment, and to have a more significant, longer lasting impact on cognitive and creative potential (Fredrickson, [2001](#) Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *The American Psychologist*, 56, 218–226. [[Crossref](#)], [[PubMed](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]). While the research underpinning Fredrickson’s work is supportive of her conclusions, the absence of the individual’s understanding of their experience, and the meaning they give to it, is noticeable by its absence. This is apparent more widely in the research into positive psychological constructs and interventions, and it is an absence that needs to be addressed. Similarly, research into the positive effects of interventions incorporating Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, [2000](#) Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *The American Psychologist*, 55, 68–78. [[Crossref](#)], [[PubMed](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]) and Self Efficacy (Maddux, Sherer, & Rogers, [1982](#) Maddux, J. E., Sherer, M., & Rogers, R. W. (1982). Self-efficacy expectancy and outcome expectancy: Their relationship and their effects on behavioral intentions. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 6(2), 207–211. [[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]), as well as Gratitude (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, [2003](#) Watkins, P. C., Woodward, K., Stone, T., & Kolts, R. L. (2003). Gratitude and Happiness: Development of a Measure of Gratitude and Relationships with Subjective Wellbeing. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*. [[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]), rests primarily on evidence accumulated through self-report scales that do not allow access to the richness of participants’ accounts.

It is important to state here that positive psychology does not purport to live an existence in pure positivity, where positive= good and negative = bad. Indeed, a strong message within the second wave of positive psychology (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon & Lomas, 2015) has recently emerged that encourages the importance of embracing all life experiences (both objectively “positive” and negative”) across the lifespan, as even those experiences that can

be challenging, hurtful or uncomfortable have the potential for growth (Ivtzan et al., [2015](#) Ivtzan, I., Lomas, T., Worth, P., and Hefferon, K. (2015). *Second Wave Positive Psychology: Embracing the Dark Side of Life*. Routledge. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)).

Mindfulness

Prominent among the many concepts and applications of interest in PP is mindfulness. This term is derived from the Pāli concept of *sati*, having been coined (i.e., as a calque) by the Buddhist scholar T. W. Rhys Davids ([1910](#) Rhys Davids, T. W. (1910). *Dialogues of the Buddha* (Vol. 2). London: Henry Frowde. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Defining these terms is difficult due to shifting patterns of usage, both historically and currently. In Brahmanical India, *sati* initially connoted ‘remembrance’ and ‘recollection’; however the term was harnessed by the Buddha (circa 450 BCE) to denote a form of present-moment awareness Gethin ([2011](#) Gethin, R. (2011). On some definitions of mindfulness. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(01), 263–279. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), as for instance outlined in seminal teachings like the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (the Discourse on the establishment of mindfulness). Having been introduced to the West by the likes of Rhys Davids, the 20th Century saw mindfulness being operationalised and harnessed within psychology. Accounts of this process often rightly highlight the role of Kabat-Zinn ([1982](#) Kabat-Zinn, J. (1982). An outpatient program in behavioral medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results. *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 4(1), 33–47. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), who in the late 1970s created his pioneering Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as a treatment for chronic pain, and who defines mindfulness as ‘the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment’ (Kabat-Zinn, [2003](#) Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#), p.145). However, prior to that, mindfulness had been harnessed within psychotherapeutic fields, as for instance summarised by Deatherage ([1975](#) Deatherage, G. (1975). The clinical use of ‘mindfulness’ meditation techniques in short-term psychotherapy. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 7(2), 133. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Such endeavours influenced and paved the way for Kabat-Zinn’s work (Dryden & Still, [2006](#) Dryden, W., & Still, A. (2006). Historical aspects of mindfulness and self-acceptance in psychotherapy. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 24(1), 3–28. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Felder, Aten, Neudeck, Shiomi-Chen, & Robbins, [2014](#) Felder, A. J., Aten, H. M., Neudeck, J. A., Shiomi-Chen, J., & Robbins, B. D. (2014). Mindfulness at the Heart of Existential-Phenomenology and Humanistic Psychology: A Century of Contemplation and Elaboration. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 42(1), 6–23. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), and for the harnessing of mindfulness in fields like PP (reflecting the more general influence of psychotherapy and humanistic psychology on PP, as noted above).

Thus, as mindfulness has been embraced by scholars affiliated to PP, this has given rise to theories such as Garland, Farb, Goldin, and Fredrickson’s (2015) mindfulness-to-meaning theory, and to interventions like Ivtzan et al.’s (2016) Mindfulness Based Flourishing Program, which is the focus of the current paper. Specifying what makes such theories and interventions PP-related – as opposed to being primarily associated with other fields, such as clinical psychology – is difficult, not least because the ‘territory’ of PP has not been clearly delineated (Lomas, Hefferon, and Ivtzan, [2015](#) Lomas, T., Hefferon, K., & Ivtzan, I. (2015). The LIFE model: A meta-theoretical conceptual map for applied positive psychology.

Journal of Happiness Studies, 16(5), 1347–1364. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Nor is it easy to assign work according to the affiliations of the scholars producing it. For instance, with the aforementioned mindfulness-to-meaning theory, whereas Fredrickson tends to be consistently linked to PP, Garland is a licensed psychotherapist. In any case, given the intimate historical and current connections between PP, psychotherapy, and humanistic psychology, as outlined above, it perhaps makes little sense to exclusively associate a given theory or intervention with just one of these fields. However, perhaps what can be said regarding these ‘positive’ approaches to mindfulness – e.g., in contrast to Kabat-Zinn’s (1982) Kabat-Zinn, J. (1982). An outpatient program in behavioral medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results. *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 4(1), 33–47. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) MBSR – is that rather than alleviating negative mental phenomena (e.g., feelings of anxiety), they are more concerned with facilitating states and process that can be regarded as ‘positive,’ such as ‘warm’ emotions (e.g., loving-kindness) and meaning in life. That said, it is perhaps unwise to overstate the differences between different approaches to mindfulness, whether in PP, clinical fields, or more traditional Buddhist settings. For instance, most teachers and practitioners of mindfulness, regardless of their affiliation, suggest that awareness should imbued with positive emotional qualities (e.g., with a spirit of loving-kindness) (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009 Shapiro, S. L., & Carlson, L. E. (2009). *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Thus it is perhaps more a question of emphasis, with these positive qualities being rather more implicit and in the background in interventions like MBSR, and more explicit and foregrounded in programmes such as MBF.

Mindfulness in education

Recognising the strength of evidence based arguments in support of both positive psychological approaches and mindfulness, education has been at the forefront of explorations into their application. Working in schools presents challenges and pressures which can impact negatively upon the wellbeing of both staff and students (Jepson & Forrest, 2006 Jepson, E., & Forrest, S. (2006). Individual contributory factors in teacher stress: the role of achievement striving and occupational commitment. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, 183–197. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), the addressing of which is widely reflected in the development and delivery of a variety of programmes designed to increase wellbeing (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009 Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); White, 2011 White, J. P. (2011). *Exploring Well-being in Schools: A Guide to Making Children’s Lives More Fulfilling*. Taylor & Francis. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). These programmes incorporate many aspects of the positive psychology corpus, and have been demonstrated to consistently enhance wellbeing. While the effectiveness of these programmes themselves depends on a series of variables such as the quality and consistency of their delivery, in respect of the focus of this study, the key points to note are that they primarily focus on students, and that once again the evidence accrued in support of their efficacy signally lacks the lived experience of those involved.

The same is true for the application of mindfulness in schools, with evidence growing in support of the potentially significant benefits for both students and staff (Weare, 2013 Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence

and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services*, 8, 141–153. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Benefits include an increased capacity for emotional self-regulation, increased learning, and more frequent demonstration of positive behaviours, while the effectiveness of programmes is enhanced when both teachers and students are simultaneously engaged in the process (Meiklejohn et al., 2012 Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M. L., Griffin, M. L., Biegel, G., Roach, A., ... Saltzman, A. (2012). Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students. *Mindfulness*, 3(4), 291–307. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Again however, the evidence base for such assertions lacks sufficient attempts to explore participants' experience. As Weare (2013 Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services*, 8, 141–153. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) pointedly highlights in her literature review of the studies in this area to appear in peer reviewed journals, there is an excessive reliance on self-report measures. It should also be noted that they are based on an assessment of mindfulness practice alone, and not on a deliberate and comprehensive collaboration between it and Positive Psychology.

An appreciation of the potential of mindfulness to contribute to increases in wellbeing has led to the development of approaches seeking to combine it with concepts and approaches adopted as key elements of Positive Psychology. Mindfulness Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) (Niemiec, 2012 Niemiec, R. M. (2012). Mindful living: Character strengths interventions as pathways for the five mindfulness trainings. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2, 22–33. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) does so by bringing together the practice of mindfulness and the cultivation of character strengths to create a virtuous cycle leading to enhanced wellbeing. Programmes such as MBSP and Mindful Self Compassion (Neff & Germer, 2013 Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A Pilot Study and Randomized Controlled Trial of the Mindful Self-Compassion Program. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69, 28–44. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) evidence the effectiveness of focussing mindfulness in specific areas.

Despite the emerging body of evidence in support of the efficacy of the application of Positive Psychology constructs and mindfulness, either separately or in combination, there continues to be a need for research that has as its intention the development of an understanding of participants' experience, as felt and described by them (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011 Hefferon, K., & Gil-Rodriguez, E. (2011). Reflecting on the rise in popularity of interpretive phenomenological analysis. *The Psychologist*, 24(10), 756–759. [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). It is this gap that this study addresses, doing so in the context of staff working in a small independent special school, itself an addition to the literature, who have completed a Mindfulness Based Flourishing programme (Ivtzan et al, 2016 Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). In its conscious merging of mindfulness and Positive Psychology into a coherent, fluid process, the MBF reveals and encourages the activation of a “positive mindfulness cycle” (Ivtzan et al, 2016 Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). This is a process by which both mindfulness and positive psychological interventions impact on each other in ways that lead to increased levels of wellbeing. As such, the MBF marks a deliberate

attempt to move towards the provision of mindfulness programmes that have the stated aim of positive transformation as opposed to that of reducing suffering. Alongside the statistical support for the beneficial impact of the MBF (Ivtzan et al, [2016](#) Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) sits the conclusion that an additional qualitative component is required, one that can assist in clarifying participants' lived experience of engagement in the programme. This in turn will contribute to ongoing explorations into understanding the factors that contribute to the programme's effectiveness.

While it might be interesting to assess the impact of Mindfulness Based Flourishing programmes in a variety of contexts, doing so within a school offers a very particular opportunity. Teachers generally experience significant challenges in having to contain and mediate the often powerful emotions of students, doing so against a background of contradictory expectations (Delfino et al., [2010](#) Delfino, M., Dettori, G., & Persico, D. (2010). An online course fostering self-regulation of trainee teachers. *Psicothema*, 22, 299–305.[\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Similarly, there is evidence of high stress levels amongst teaching staff, with many adopting less effective avoidance coping strategies (Jepson and Forrest, [2006](#) Jepson, E., & Forrest, S. (2006). Individual contributory factors in teacher stress: the role of achievement striving and occupational commitment. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, 183–197.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Griva & Joeke, [2003](#) Griva, K., & Joeke, K. (2003). UK Teachers Under Stress: Can We Predict Wellness on the Basis of Characteristics of the Teaching Job? *Psychology & Health*.[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Both mindfulness and positive psychological approaches have, as indicated, been claimed to enhance individuals' capacity for more effective self-regulation and hence increased wellbeing (Carmody, [2009](#) Carmody, J. (2009). Evolving Conceptions of Mindfulness in Clinical Settings. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 23(3), 270–280.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). However, as yet, little research has been carried out with staff in schools while harnessing the combination of positive psychology and mindfulness. This study therefore provides an opportunity to both contribute to addressing the general lack of qualitative research relating to mindfulness and positive psychology, and more specifically to do so in a context seemingly open to benefitting from the advantages the MBF is intended to confer.

Significant evidence has been accumulated attesting to the practical benefits of both Positive Psychology and mindfulness (Ivtzan and Lomas, [2016](#) Ivtzan, I., & Lomas, T. (2016). *Mindfulness in positive psychology: the science of meditation and wellbeing*. London: Routledge. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Hart, Ivtzan, & Hart, [2013](#) Hart, R., Ivtzan, I., & Hart, D. (2013). Mind the gap in mindfulness research: A comparative account of the leading schools of thought. *Review of General Psychology*, 17, 453–466.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, [2005](#) Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. a, Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *The American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–21.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), However, gaps exist in research limiting the extent to which we have a full understanding of the mechanisms at work in interventions, and in particular, of participants' lived experience of engagement in them. Through the exploration of participants' experience of one such intervention this study seeks to address a specific gap in the literature.

Method

Design

A significant absence of qualitative research into the practical application of mindfulness based positive psychological interventions has been identified (Weare, [2013](#) Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services*, 8, 141–153. [[Crossref](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]). In contributing to the closing of this gap the authors have chosen to employ an IPA approach as it is best suited to their intention of uncovering the subtle depths of a particular set of people's particular experience, in this instance, participants in a MBF. While alternative approaches such as Narrative Analysis (Olson & Bruner, [1992](#) Olson, D. R., & Bruner, J. S. (1992). Acts of Meaning. *Educational Researcher*. [[Google Scholar](#)]) or Grounded Theory (Charmaz, [2006](#) Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Book (Vol. 10). [[Google Scholar](#)]) may provide insights into the broad structures people adopt to describe their experience, helping to develop theoretical level explanations for behaviours, neither allows for the deep examination of the lived experience of the individual (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, [2009](#) Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Google eBook). SAGE. [[Google Scholar](#)]). Thus, the approach used here is not only idiographic and phenomenological, but also interpretative in that it harnesses the researcher and their engagement across a detailed and rigorous process, including multi-layered levels of analyses (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual); the latter, which aim to reach a higher-level of abstraction and harness the interpretative process (Etough & Smith, [2013](#) Etough, V & Smith, J. (2013) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In C Willig & W Stainton-Rogers (Eds). *The SaGag Handbook of Qualitative research* (pp. 179–194). London; Sage [[Google Scholar](#)]). It also employed a double hermeneutic process sees the researcher making sense of the participant (expert) making sense of their experience (Smith & Osborn, [2003](#) Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In *Qualitative Psychology : A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp. 51–80). [[Google Scholar](#)]). This approach respects the integrity of the participants' interpretation of their experience whilst recognising the limitations inherent therein, fully aware that experiences and the meaning they are given, are the result of a collaborative process. IPA is an avowedly interpretative process that recognises the shared role played by researcher and participant in shaping the results of any study. Consequently, the results of an IPA study do not purport to be "The Truth", but rather, by applying the criteria of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Yardley, [2000](#) Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and Health*, 15, 215–228. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]), it offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of important phenomenon.

Participants

Following ethical approval from the University of East London, all 11 participants in a MBF, having shared a homogenous experience, were invited to contribute to the current study, with 7 registering their willingness to do so via email. 3 participants, sufficient for a thorough exploration of individuals' experience (Smith et al., [2009](#) Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Google eBook). SAGE. [[Google Scholar](#)]), were then identified for interview by random selection. Thus, participants were 3 women who completed a MBF delivered to a volunteer

group of 11 staff working in an independent special school. Relevant demographic variables are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

[CSVDisplay Table](#)

Procedure

About the Mindfulness Based Flourishing programme

The MBF was developed by the 4th author and was taught by the 1st author (Please refer to earlier publications for full review of the strengths and limitations of the MBF programme; Ivtzan et al., [2016](#) Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407[[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science @](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]). Furthermore, the 1st author was responsible for conducting and analysing the interviews. Conducting evaluations of programmes where the authors are involved in the creation, dissemination and evaluation of the programme are common. Despite this However, neither the school nor the participants paid for the programme, so in this sense there was no financial commitment that might cause either participants or commissioners of the programme to artificially identify a positive outcome to justify their investment. Additionally, the 1st author engaged in continual reflexivity and supervisory sessions to ensure that they were reflective and transparent in their engagement with the data.

As opposed to accessing the MBF online (Ivtzan et al, [2016](#) Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407[[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science @](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]), participants accessed it by means of 8 weekly, face to face group sessions each lasting 90 minutes. The MBF sessions were held in the school building. However, they were all conducted after the school day was over so that participants were able to more fully focus on the content and processes involved in each session. Each week focused on the combination of mindfulness with a different positive psychology topic: (1) self-awareness, (2) positive emotions, (3) self-compassion, (4) self-efficacy (strengths), (5) autonomy, (6) meaning, (7) positive relations with others and (8) engagement (savouring). Each session comprised of an opportunity to reflect on the previous week's topic, sharing experiences, thoughts, insights and concerns, followed by an exploration of that week's topic, and then a shared mindfulness meditation, bringing together both the positive psychological and mindfulness elements of the programme. Sessions were led by a qualified mindfulness and positive psychology facilitator. Participants were given access to recordings of each week's meditation which they practiced on a daily basis. Inherent in each meditation was encouragement for participants to actively apply whatever aspect of the programme the recording was focussing on.

Following delivery of the MBF and clarification of the ethics underpinning the study, participants were interviewed in turn. Interviews took place in school, at times when there would be no interruptions. Each interview followed a semi-structured approach, there being 5 core questions chosen to act as non-directive reference points facilitating the participant's exploration of their experience (e.g. What was your experience of the programme?). As interviews progressed, additional minimal questions eg. "Can you tell me more about that?"

were asked in order to encourage a deeper exploration of issues and themes already raised by the participant (Smith et al., [2009](#) Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Google eBook). SAGE. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Following their interview, each participant was debriefed. Each interview, ranging in length from 47 – 65 minutes, and recorded on a Sony hand held device, was subsequently transcribed word for word, with participants' names replaced with pseudonyms. Before the first interview, and between subsequent interviews, the researcher employed a reflective diary, engaging in the process of examining the interplay in meaning making between researcher and participant (Smith et al., [2009](#) Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Google eBook). SAGE. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)).

Analysis

Each transcript was read several times before a line by line process of exploratory coding was employed, with 3 levels of analysis taking place; description of the content, linguistic, and conceptual (Flowers et al., [2006](#) Flowers, P., Davis, M., Hart, G., Rosengarten, M., Frankis, J., & Imrie, J. (2006). Diagnosis and stigma and identity amongst HIV positive Black Africans living in the UK. *Psychology & Health*, 21(1), 109–122. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). A series of emergent themes was then identified before, through processes of abstraction and subsumption (Smith et al., [2009](#) Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Google eBook). SAGE. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), a series of super-ordinate themes emerged. This process, becoming as it does increasingly interpretative, demonstrates the collaborative nature of IPA, however, it is an interpretation that is drawn from, and supported by the words of the participant.

Following this process, 5 central themes ultimately emerged from the interpretative analysis of the participants' words, themes that were in significant ways shared in the experience of each participant. The number of questions asked during the interview (n=5) and the subsequent number of identified themes (n=5) is purely coincidental and are independent of the number of questions asked. This process identified self-contained and yet potentially inter-related themes that need not contain sub themes (Chapman, Chapman, Smith, & Smith, [2002](#) Chapman, E., Chapman, E., Smith, J. A., & Smith, J. A. (2002). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the New Genetics. *J Health Psychol*, 7, 125–130. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). The themes identified are shown in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1: Five central themes that emerged from the interpretative analysis of the participants' words.



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Results

1 Questioning Identity: The challenge of emerging awareness

Collectively, participants reported their experience as engaging them in a process of fundamental self-evaluation, going significantly beyond the scope they may originally have anticipated when starting the programme. As Rebecca pointedly asks of herself, though clearly finding the question difficult to come to terms with:

“I suppose it might be about legacy, you know, who, what the purpose of, this is such a huge question, why were you ever born in the first place?” (Rebecca)

For Rebecca the programme has contributed to a complete reassessment of what she perceives her life to have been about. While the process is a challenging one it also appears to be profoundly positive, suggestive of a return to a child like state, or perhaps a “rebirth”, rooted in a rediscovery of a strength that she may have felt she had lost, or perhaps never had. Below she explains her realisation that:

“I hadn’t really lived at all. There you are! That was my first, it was like, this is a child just feeling balance ..” (Rebecca)

And later ...

“The biggest thing is that I accessed, or I felt like I was able to access... the sort of core of what I represent.” (Rebecca)

This process of rediscovery is also apparent in Emma’s experience as she describes how:

“that was probably the beginning of me relaxing and as I unwrapped myself, finding that creative person” (Emma)

And later...

“I had almost forgotten that person, that is what it did for me and I did not expect that to happen.” (Emma)

Emma's sense of the easing of tightness as she creates space for the re-emergence of a greater capacity for creativity, is tempered by the dissociated way in which she describes "that" person. It's as if in rediscovering what she feels is a profoundly positive aspect of herself there is an implicit fear that it may disappear as quickly as it appeared. The continued use of third person references in the quote below reinforces the sense of separation, it's as if she's asking, "can this really be me?"

"I felt that there were two halves of me, one that had been locked away, and the mindfulness has been able to get in touch with that person again, and I quite like that person, and it makes the other half of me nicer, so I don't want to lose it" (Emma)

While Emma's discovery may have been a surprise to her, there is a sense in the words of Kirsty that she has an implicit, though perhaps unconscious awareness of what she's looking for from the programme. It's as if at some level, and for some time there's been an emerging frustration with the self that's allowed her to be, in some sense, almost invisible, as she hoped that:

"mindfulness would help me find a way of slowing down a little and creating some space and time to think about me, because I don't think about me, I think about everybody else and what they need, but I don't think about myself so much, or I haven't done should I say" (Kirsty)

Participants' experiencing of an emerging self awareness, that in its various guises is perhaps both challenging and exciting, was something not contained at a purely cognitive and emotional level. Rather, it was increasingly experienced as felt physical sensations, something that is explored in the following theme.

2 An Emerging Sense of the Physical Self

Participants' accounts of their experience demonstrate the extent to which both unconsciously, and increasingly consciously, the body plays a central role in creating and reflecting that experience. Rebecca's account for example, shows how references to an unconscious awareness of the body become increasingly apparent, whereas previously her remarks are notable for the centrality of mental processes:

"It's like "Ohh" this takes your breath away, it takes your breath away" (Rebecca)

And later ...

"I felt supported, I felt like there was a support there even though it wasn't anything tangible, it felt like a support I could reach out and grab if I wanted to hmm" (Rebecca)

And further on ...

"I could stand on my own two feet, but it didn't matter who tried to knock me down, I can, I just know I could feel the strength of me" (Rebecca)

Rebecca's use of metaphors relating to the availability of support structures that are perhaps external, are gradually giving way to a grounded sense of self efficacy and self reliance. It's she who has the strength to support herself, and from this comes a growing conscious awareness of the body and the benefits that she identifies can stem from this process:

“I learnt from doing the um, er, the process to think about my whole body, not just, I don’t know, the gut and the heart or something” (Rebecca)

And later ...

“I have more indicators, I have got more senses, it’s like I have gained another sense, there you are, that clicked, it’s like I have gained another sense” (Rebecca)

An increased conscious awareness of the body was also experienced by Emma, although for her it was initially in the form of her mindfulness practice leading to a physical tiredness and falling asleep. However, as the programme progressed, her experience became more positive, with sessions experienced as energising. Nevertheless, a key aspect of Emma’s experience appears to be finding her mind and her body as somehow in competition with each other:

“that mind and body thing was a real barrier for me, and it took probably half of the programme for my mind to be stronger than my body and to absolutely stay in the moment” (Emma)

Kirsty similarly experienced a growing bodily awareness as challenging:

“... ah feeling overburdened by just how busy life was and I felt, I remember feeling it in my chest, and initially doing the mindfulness um made me feel as though that feeling was augmented um, and being able to recognise that at first I felt quite intimidating” (Kirsty)

And later ...

“I woke up having this feeling in my chest, I couldn’t get the computer to do what I wanted it to do and my husband came in to say can I help you, and I basically barked at him, which I never do, and then I was in tears” (Kirsty)

However, despite the process creating an environment in which previously contained physical stresses and challenging emotions were able to come to the surface, Kirsty demonstrates a determination to see things through. There’s a growing self-awareness that is able to accept a fuller, perhaps more honest assessment of her whole experience, not as a means to justify where she is, but as a basis for positive change. Indeed she adopts an almost surgical metaphor below, describing her sense of inner turmoil as akin to a malignant growth that had to be removed, painful but life enhancing:

“Because since, since that kind of blow out during that self awareness, I haven’t um, I haven’t felt so much in turmoil, I have felt so much calmer. It is almost like something leaving my body that I had to get rid of, so it was quite horrible at the time, but it was quite cathartic.” (Kirsty)

Participants’ growing awareness of experience as being fully embodied was mirrored in the way in which engagement with the programme led to exploration of the nature of their connection with others, as will be demonstrated below.

3 Connection as Transformative

Evidence of the programme generating an increased sense of awareness of the nature of participants' connection, both to others as well as to their own emotional experience, was apparent throughout each interview. For Emma the metaphor of "unwrapping" is developed further:

"I found that I was getting a really powerful reaction from things, almost like being, having your layers peeled away" (Emma)

And later ...

"I felt emotional, it was like someone hitting a button, and I wrote a little note for myself, "I need to explore why, why did your saying that being kind to yourself, why did that make me feel so emotional?"" (Emma)

The sense of vulnerability that's found in exposing a deeper sense of self which the person has either not been consciously aware of, or has perhaps chosen to hide or in some way subjugate, is also found in Kirsty's account of the increased self awareness resulting from her participation. Here she speaks of how she responded in what was to her an unusual manner to a situation in which her husband interrupted her:

"I just don't feel you listen to me" (Kirsty)

And later ...

"I just sort of try and let those things go, but it can make you quietly passive aggressive on the inside, um, and so on that particular week I thought "I will have to be careful with this one"" (Kirsty)

While there is a sense of an almost dangerous, uncontrolled power in Kirsty's new found, though fragile assertiveness, particularly in relation to its potential impact on relationships with others, there is also a realisation that being true to herself could bring positive consequences:

"Um, it did feel good to finally say that, um, and it did have a good outcome because he, pardon me, he will listen to me more. Um, but at the time causing the friction didn't feel good because I don't like friction and confrontation, um, yeah." (Kirsty)

For all three participants, whether it was rooted in specific practices such as Loving Kindness or Gratitude, or whether it was the result of immersion in the programme as a whole, there was a new found sense of connection with people close, and not so close. The following quote demonstrates how for Emma the practice of Gratitude led to a recognition of the way that assumptions can often be misleading, and in this recognition she is once again able to reconnect with a powerful source of emotional and psychological feedback:

"I got a lot back from their reaction, and I was just really surprised at just how much it meant to other people for me to say, what in many respects you think they know, but actually some things need to be said don't they really" (Emma)

Meanwhile Kirsty explains how her Loving Kindness practice led her to experience a greater sense of connection not just to close loved ones, but to someone she scarcely knows. In the quote that follows she speaks of extending loving kindness to an old man who lives down the street. Interestingly, neither prior to, nor after her practice has Kirsty ever spoken to this man, and yet she experiences a felt connection that gives inspiration and meaning:

“It was lovely to extend that to him as well. Um, yeah, I found that one very powerful, very uplifting, very enjoyable”

Indeed, the reassertion of a truly powerful underlying sense of connection is apparent in Emma’s realisation of the frequency with which she found herself using the word “Love”. This reaches its highest expression in the epitaph she writes for herself:

“here lies Emma Francis a woman who gave and received love every day of her life”
(Emma)

Rebecca’s assertion of the paramount nature of love is just as strong, although in the insistence of her repetition, and in her use of the phrase, “even though”, one may wonder who needs most persuading?

“I absolutely and really believe in love in its truest form, the phrase is the answer to everything, yes I do I absolutely believe in it, and nobody, but nobody can persuade me otherwise, not anymore, even though, well because I have learnt, done this learning, so I can allow myself to be myself and just go, “This is how it is”” (Rebecca)

While the transformative effects of reconnecting with self and others is a significant aspect of participants’ declared experience, other gains form the next theme.

4 A sense of something profound that’s been gained

Each participant in their own way experienced positive, and indeed profound personal gains as a result of engaging with the programme. For Rebecca there was the sought after discovery of something she could follow, a prescription, a process that she determined could bring her the peace she craves. So powerful is her discovery that almost despite herself she frames it in religious terms:

“I feel like, it sounds awful, it is like how I understand a sort of spiritual, religious sort of enlightening sort of feelings about things. It is not, it is not... it’s just a sort of profound gain, a profound gain, a really, really positive part of the recipe of life” (Rebecca)

And later...

“I feel like I want to be an evangelist and tell everybody this is what to do” (Rebecca)

There’s no denying the power of the change Rebecca claims to have experienced, and perhaps just as profoundly, her ownership of responsibility for how she lives her life:

“I feel like I am living every minute. That, that’s what is fantastic. I feel like I can live every minute if I choose to” (Rebecca)

At one level, the impact of the programme on Kirsty would appear meagre by comparison as she speaks of being more efficient and more aware, more able too, to set and achieve goals. However, even in their apparent simplicity these benefits speak of an enhanced sense of the regaining of control. Not only does she express a conviction that she has a wider range of tools with which to manage the challenges of her life, Kirsty is able now to take a longer, more positive perspective:

“I don’t feel that there are certain aspects that are impossible, and that there are goals that I can work towards. I may not be able to achieve them straight away, but that too is okay rather than the frustration” (Kirsty)

More fundamental however, is the knowledge that Kirsty has gained about herself, and her consequent capacity to more effectively manage the thoughts that had so often overwhelmed her:

“I thought I was a calm person before, but in the process of this I discovered that inside of me was turmoil and I hadn’t expected that at all, I hadn’t expected to discover that. Um, but I can say now, genuinely, that I do feel calm inside I um, ah, I am able to approach tasks and prioritise without you know, six or seven other things interfering with my thoughts”

Kirsty’s discovery that her apparent calmness had in fact masked a state of inner turmoil, is in some ways mirrored in the fundamental reappraisal of a keystone of Emma’s life. Having expressed earlier the importance to her of success and status, she finds herself questioning the basic assumption that underpins it, that she has no choice, this is who she is. The questioning alone may not necessarily result in a radical shift in thoughts or actions, however, in her almost despairing attempt to grasp the possibility of change there is the sense that she would like this to be a seminal moment in her life:

“I am asking myself questions because I am referring back to always being A2 (second best) never being A1 (best), “am I A1 now?” is what I ask myself, and I put “I suppose I am”, but I will always have a need to be at the top of my game. And then I asked myself, “but I could always stop playing”, and I don’t know how I hang onto that, other than take part in more mindfulness sessions. (Emma)

As perhaps hinted at in Emma’s final sentence, there is to some degree, and amongst all participants, a sense that their gains are not yet secure.

5 Fear of the fragility of what’s been gained

Despite a strong personal sense of having gained from engagement with the programme, there are elements in the testimony of all participants suggestive of the fact that to some degree or other their hold on these gains may be fragile. For Rebecca, what might be seen as an excessive need to find something solid to hold onto, something that will confirm her belief in who she sees herself to be, amidst a personal experience that has shaken such beliefs to the core, may contribute to a need to convince herself as much as others of her gains. In such a context it may not be surprising that she was torn between the rational adult and the vulnerable child:

“I’ve got a lot more learning to do, you see as soon as I say that I felt myself going back to being this 12 year old little girl” (Rebecca)

While perhaps less dramatic, Kirsty's evidence speaks similarly of an unconscious fragility. This is particularly apparent in her frequent use of modal operators of necessity when she speaks of what it is she thinks she's gained from the programme. For example, in the quote below the repeated use of "need", amplified by the phrase "because it is good for me" suggests a lack of self-efficacy and a consequent lack of motivation that sees the process of change situated externally to Kirsty, as though she either doesn't truly want it, or it's something she believes she cannot have.

"it's a practice that I need to get back into regularly, I have let it slip a bit, but it is something that I need to get back into regularly because I think it is so good for me" (Kirsty)

For Emma there is perhaps a more conscious awareness of the fragility of the gains she has made. There is a clear sense that the process is far from complete, and that in some sense she's been left in a challenging position, wanting more, while feeling less secure of old certainties, yet with no strong sense of a new reality.

"I am a bit lost, I don't know where I am going, how do I develop that I suppose" (Emma)

And later...

"It has just made me hungry, it has made me feel that I know very little about mindfulness" (Emma)

Perhaps most pertinently, when faced with the fundamental reappraisal of self-identity implied in the question below, Emma turns away, unwilling, or perhaps unable to answer, and in so doing marks the current limits of the programme's impact on her.

"I went on to say, "Could I always stop playing?" um, no I didn't answer it so I don't know" (Emma)

For each participant, their wholehearted engagement with the programme has led them on a journey of challenge, discovery, and growth. Each has learned things about themselves and how they relate to the world that they had either forgotten, buried, or perhaps been unaware of. As a result of their explorations they have all gained access to ways of thinking and being that in their own experience has been seen to be potentially transformative. And yet, each in turn has now to face the challenge, and the choice, of how and whether to act on what's been learned in ways that may perhaps embed the progress they deem to have made. The alternative could well be that the gains each identifies may be lost.

Discussion

Analysis demonstrates the significant impact the MBF had on all participants, reinforcing many of the conclusions reached in other studies (e.g., Ivtzan et al., [2016](#) Ivtzan, I., Young, T., Martman, J., Jeffrey, A., Lomas, T., Hart, R., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. (2016). Integrating mindfulness into positive psychology: A randomised controlled trial of an online positive mindfulness program. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1396–1407 [[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]; Garland, Farb, Goldin, & Fredrikson, 2015). Rebecca, Emma and Kirsty all experienced, in various ways, an increased sense of connection with others stemming from enhanced self-compassion, a process leading to increased psychological and physical wellbeing. While this has been identified as a positive consequence of Loving Kindness

interventions (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, [2008](#) Hutcherson, C. A., Seppala, E. M., & Gross, J. J. (2008). Loving-kindness meditation increases social connectedness. *Emotion (Washington, D.C.)*, 8, 720–724.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), these relied primarily on self-report scales, the current study serving to enhance knowledge of how the process was experienced by participants.

One of the few IPA studies conducted in this area (Boellinghaus, [2014](#) Boellinghaus, I. (2014). The role of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation in cultivating self-compassion and other-focused concern in health care professionals. *Mindfulness*, 5(2), 14–21.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) examined therapists experience of a Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) programme, demonstrating positive consequences for relationships and self-efficacy. The current study underlines these conclusions, expanding them to include an assessment of a programme whose scope includes, but is not limited to LKM, and goes beyond them by focusing on participants who have not had previous experience of mindfulness, and who are not currently experiencing physical or psychological trauma. Hence, the study, in a rich, evocative, yet rigorous manner, re-emphasises the benefits of combining mindfulness with positive psychology, based on the MBF. We provide support for the extension of a programme, which in contrast to most existing programmes (Teasdale et al., [2000](#) Teasdale, J. D., Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M., Ridgeway, V. A., Soulsby, J. M., & Lau, M. A. (2000). *Prevention of relapse/recurrence in major depression by mindfulness-based cognitive therapy*. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology* (Vol. 68).[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Craigie, Rees, Marsh, & Nathan, [2008](#) Craigie, M. A., Rees, C. S., Marsh, A., & Nathan, P. (2008). Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Generalized Anxiety Disorder: A Preliminary Evaluation. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) is not deficit based, but which offers a practical means of enhancing wellbeing for those not in psychological distress.

Participants' experience of in some way rediscovering an alternative, more empowering sense of themselves confirms additional existing research (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, [2006](#) Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E., Astin, J. A., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Like Shapiro et al., the current study identifies the growing capacity for self-regulation and consequent emotional and behavioural flexibility resultant from mindfulness practice, while however, doing so in a way that adds a hitherto absent richness and depth.

Participants similarly experienced additional benefits, benefits also reported in other studies. For example, as well as increased self-compassion, there was a shared sense of greater self-awareness and self-acceptance, leading to greater capacity for engaging with the present in ways that reduced critical self-judgement (Carson & Langer, [2006](#) Carson, S. H., & Langer, E. J. (2006). Mindfulness and self-acceptance. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 24(1), 29–43.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Participants also noted a greater awareness of their own physicality, and their own embodiment, moving away from a dualistic notion of body and mind to a more entwined way of being. This reconnection to the body and enhanced body awareness has been consistently reported as potential route towards increased wellbeing (Hefferon, 2013; Brani, Hefferon, Lomas, Ivtzan & Painter, [2014](#) Brani, O., Hefferon, K., Lomas, T., Ivtzan, I., & Painter, J. (2014). The impact of body awareness on subjective wellbeing: The role of mindfulness. *International Body Psychotherapy Journal*, 13(1), 95–107 [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Cash, [2004](#) Cash, T. F. (2004). Body image: Past, present, and future. *Body image*, 1(1), 1–5.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Similarly, and

although not necessarily consolidated, there was evidence of participants exploring with positive consequences, a sense of personal meaning (Carmody, [2009](#) Carmody, J. (2009). Evolving Conceptions of Mindfulness in Clinical Settings. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 23(3), 270–280.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), whilst on occasion touching on feelings of mastery and competence (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008).

It is important to note however, that not all elements of participants' experience were positive. At various points each experienced significant levels of challenge, reinforcing the need to deliver mindfulness based programmes with great care (Grabovac, Lau, & Willett, 2011; Boellinghaus, [2014](#) Boellinghaus, I. (2014). The role of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation in cultivating self-compassion and other-focused concern in health care professionals. *Mindfulness*, 5(2), 14–21.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). This should be noted by practitioners considering introducing or expanding the delivery of such programmes. They are not without risk, and insights such as those of participants in the current study should be considered as markers to the essential nature of having a strong ethical basis. Indeed, there is a growing critical literature exploring the ways in which mindfulness is being adapted or harnessed in contemporary life. For instance, scholars have highlighted the way that mindfulness is frequently presented in a secular way, decontextualized from the nexus of Buddhist ideas and practices – known collectively as the 'dharma' – in which it was originally conceived and developed (Lomas, [2016](#) Lomas, T. (2016). Recontextualising mindfulness: Theravada Buddhist perspectives on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of awareness. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Thus, whereas in this original context mindfulness was indelibly linked to teachings around ethics, spirituality, and the (problematic) nature of the self, this contextual framing is often not present in mindfulness as widely taught and practised today.

This decontextualization has been recognized as being potentially problematic for various reasons, including by Kabat-Zinn himself, who wrote that 'the rush to define mindfulness within Western psychology may wind up denaturing it in fundamental ways,' and as such there is 'the potential for something priceless to be lost' (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, [2011](#) Williams, J. M. G., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2011). Mindfulness: Diverse perspectives on its meaning, origins, and multiple applications at the intersection of science and dharma. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(01), 1–18.[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#), p.4). For instance, it has been argued that contemporary forms of mindfulness risk being suffused with a spirit of expressive individualism that is dominant in Western cultures (Obadia, [2008](#) Obadia, L. (2008). The economies of health in Western Buddhism: A case study of a Tibetan Buddhist group in France. In D. C. Wood (Ed.), *The Economics of Health and Wellness: Anthropological Perspectives* (pp. 227–259). Oxford: JAI Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). This stands in contrast to way in which Buddhism regarded self-preoccupation as a source of suffering, and encourage practitioners to overcome this. Another critique is that mindfulness has become co-opted by consumerist and capitalist ideologies, e.g., being used in occupational contexts to enable workers to function more effectively within these systems (Van Gordon et al., [2016](#) Van Gordon, W., Shonin, E., Lomas, T., & Griffiths, M. D. (2016). Corporate use of mindfulness and authentic spiritual transmission: Competing or compatible ideals?. *Mindfulness and Compassion*.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). However, spurred on by such critiques, recent years have seen the emergence of 'second generation' mindfulness-based interventions, which re-contextualise mindfulness within a Buddhist context (e.g., its ethical frameworks) (Van Gordon, Shonin, & Griffiths, [2015](#) Van Gordon, W., Shonin, E., & Griffiths, M. D. (2015). Towards a second generation of mindfulness-based interventions. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 49(7), 591–592.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#),

[\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). The MBF cannot necessarily be identified as such an initiative, since it does not explicitly embrace Buddhist teachings. However, in its holistic spirit – touching upon multiple dimensions of participants lives – it has some parallels with the all-encompassing nature of the dharma, and so is arguably closer to these second generations than to the more secular first generation endeavours.

The importance of sustained practice (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008) is similarly echoed in the current study. Whilst participants engaged in daily practice over the 8 weeks of the MBF, they were clear in their sense of not yet having fully embedded their practice. There was a shared sense that beyond the formal lifespan of the programme they had no particular direction or purpose, and that consequently their mindfulness practice was likely to falter. It would appear that the intention, so essential to the impact of mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), and which was present during the MBF, had evaporated upon its conclusion. This will be of keen interest to, and will need to be addressed by, those looking to develop approaches to mindfulness and wellbeing that are sustainable beyond any formally delivered programme. In the context of this particular study for example, participants expressed a desire for ongoing access to a mindfulness group which would facilitate the focus and self-discipline necessary to the maintenance of an effective practice.

The current study then represents a small yet valuable contribution to the need for more qualitative research in psychology (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011 Hofmann, S. G., Grossman, P., & Hinton, D. E. (2011). Loving-kindness and compassion meditation: Potential for psychological interventions. *Clinical Psychology Review*.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)), providing another, richer layer of texture and understanding to previous studies, hinting at areas for further exploration. How for example might the lived experience of participants on an online MBF compare to those of the current study? Or, what could be contributed by a grounded theory study to the development of a broader conceptual level understanding of the processes at work in this area?

However, there are important caveats to place on any conclusions reached based on the current study. Like many others in this area (Boellinghaus, 2014 Boellinghaus, I. (2014). The role of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation in cultivating self-compassion and other-focused concern in health care professionals. *Mindfulness*, 5(2), 14–21.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Fredrickson et al., 2008) it is based on the experience of participants who are white, well educated, and self-motivated. In this particular case they were also all women over 40, further narrowing the representative nature of the group. Although the use of IPA as a chosen methodology called for a homogenous sample, it would be interesting to explore the experiences of a much wider range of people, differing in age, education, and culture to determine to what extent the experiences of participants in this study are shared by the population more generally.

The timescale involved in the study also needs to be considered, data having been collected following the completion of the programme. There have been calls for more longitudinal research in psychology (Avey, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2008 Avey, J. B., Luthans, F., & Mhatre, K. H. (2008). A call for longitudinal research in positive organizational behavior. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 29(5), 705–711.[\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) and a follow up of participants at 3, 6, and 9 months, again employing an IPA approach,

would be helpful in determining the changing nature of personal meaning, and the longevity of any changes brought about by participation in the programme.

Similarly, the current study examined the experience of participants in a programme that was delivered to a group on a face to face basis. Further work should be done in order to determine to what extent the results of the study stemmed not from the core content and practice of the programme, but from the interactions with the course leader and fellow participants. To answer these questions will require multiple replications of this study, with results compared and contrasted to those of future IPA studies into the experiences of those accessing an MBF online

Conclusion

This study then has found that experience of participation in an MBF can have important consequences for those who partake. It leads to a reappraisal of the self, with an emerging sense of competence and connectedness which, while challenging, is ultimately seen as potentially liberating. At the same time, gains accrued are found to be potentially fragile, with participants' knowledge and practice not yet fully embedded in their daily lives. Further research to establish the solidity of results, and to examine the experience of participants in varying cultural contexts and timeframes is suggested.

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