A "collective effort to make yourself feel better": The group process in mindfulness-based interventions.

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Abstract

There is growing interest in Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in the management of multiple physical and mental health issues. Although MBIs utilise a group format, research on how this format impacts upon teaching and learning mindfulness is lacking. This study aimed to develop a detailed theory of MBI group processes utilising a grounded theory methodology. This article presents our subsequent model, developed from semi-structured interviews conducted with MBI students, teachers and trainers (N=12). A core category, the group as a vessel on a shared journey, and three higher-order categories emerged from the data. They illustrate how MBI group processes navigate a characteristic path. Teachers build and steer the group 'vessel' in a way that fosters a specific culture and sense of safety. The group is facilitated to share communal experiences that augment learning and enrich mindfulness practice. Limitations and implications for clinicians and researchers are discussed.

Introduction

Mindfulness is the capacity to deliberately bring one's attention, without judgement, to all aspects of the present moment. It is a skill increasingly taught in healthcare and community settings to address a range of physical and psychological health difficulties (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), originally developed to support people managing chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Doran 2014), are increasingly available to people struggling with emotional distress as a consequence of physical pain and illness (Burch, 2008), for the self-management of conditions such as diabetes (van Son et al., 2013) and to support people in care-giving roles (Bruce & Davies, 2005). The most established and prevalent MBIs, Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; 1990) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2013; Teasdale et al., 2000) are delivered in a group format. Over the course of eight weekly group sessions with largely manualised content and a full day of predominantly silent meditation practice, participants learn mindfulness through teacher-led meditations, discussion ("inquiry"; Crane, 2009, p.148), and daily homework exercises and practices.

In developing MBSR, Jon Kabat-Zinn drew on "traditional monastic teaching" methods (1982, p.36) in which mindful practices are taught and discussed in groups. MBCT was closely modelled on MBSR, including its group format. In the United Kingdom, MCBT and MBSR are respectively taught to group sizes of about 12 and 30 participants, and it has been argued that they offer better value for money than individual psychological therapies (Kuyken et al., 2008; Mental Health Foundation, 2010). Group interventions are widely reported to provide a supportive and normalizing environment that group members can experience as therapeutic (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Experienced mindfulness teachers recognize such group therapeutic factors to be integral to the clinical efficacy of MBIs (Mental Health Foundation, 2010).

To our knowledge, there are currently no qualitative research studies and only one quantitative study (Imel, Baldwin, Bonus & MacCoon, 2008) that explore the role of the group in MBIs specifically. Imel et al. (2008) focus on group effects in MBSR interventions and conclude "group cohesion may influence the process and outcome of treatment" (p.741). They found a significant correlation between group-level variance and improved outcomes in participants' levels of psychological distress, calculating 'group effect' to account for 7% of the variance in outcome. They compare this to 5% of variance in psychotherapy treatment outcomes predicted by therapeutic alliance, and argue that the MBSR delivery and efficacy function at both the individual and group level.

A growing number of qualitative studies have explored experiences of MBIs with a variety of aims, though none have explored group processes directly. Nevertheless, multiple studies have found the group processes, defined as "the relationship between interacting individuals [within a group]" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p.143), to impact positively upon the experience of learning mindfulness. A meta-ethnographic study (Malpass et al., 2012) synthesized the results of fourteen qualitative studies exploring people's experiences of mindfulness-based interventions, and found group processes to play a key role in two out of three broad phases of participants' experiences of the therapeutic process. They describe the role of group processes in motivating students through the challenging initial weeks, thus supporting their learning and reducing stigma and isolation. These factors supported participants to a) become aware of their long-standing, often unhelpful coping strategies and shift into a phase of change, and b) develop a 'grounded flexibility' characterised by expertise in, and knowledge of, their own internal processes (2012, p.68).

Additional qualitative studies have indirectly found similar evidence of group benefits in MBIs, such as providing motivation through a sense of accountability to others and creating a

culture in which mindfulness is valued (Langdon, Jones, Hutton & Holttum, 2011), a sense of belonging to the group, cohesion and camaraderie (Chambers, Foley, Galt, Ferguson & Clutton, 2012), and of finding the group to be a normalizing and supportive environment (Griffiths, Camic & Hutton, 2009). Existing qualitative research has also raised some challenges that the group format may present. For example, people with social anxiety-type presentations may struggle to participate in MBIs due to the group format (Finucane & Mercer, 2006; Malpass et al., 2012) and people with degenerative illnesses may decide that the potential benefits of MBI participation do not outweigh the perceived disadvantages of participating alongside others at different stages of disease progression (Fitzpatrick, Simpson & Smith, 2010).

There is no clear consensus in research more broadly comparing the efficacy of group psychotherapy versus individual therapies. For example, some research has found group psychotherapy as effective as individual interventions in addressing clinically significant mental health problems (Burlingame, 2010; McRoberts, Burlingame & Hoag, 1998), and it has been claimed that increased group cohesion can be linked to improved overall outcomes in psychotherapy group setting (MacKenzie & Tschuschke, 1993). However, other studies argue that individual approaches have greater efficacy and lower drop-out rates (Cuijpers, van Straten & Warmerdam, 2008). Furthermore, Hornsey, Dwyer and Oei (2007) have warned against uncritically promoting the view that group processes, such as developing cohesion between group members, are unproblematic and always lead to improved outcomes.

In the existing mindfulness literature, there are contradictory views regarding whether MBIs affect clinical change on both a group and individual level. For example, a quantitative study (Botta, Cadet & Maramaldi, 2015) exploring the effectiveness of MBSR with social work students instructed their mindfulness teachers to resist their group work instincts for the duration

of the study, arguing that this better tested the efficacy. This illustrates their conceptualization of group effects not as core mechanisms of clinical change, but as confounding factors. Similarly, Byrne, Bond and London (2013) compared the efficacy of MBSR versus interpersonal process group interventions. They argue this enabled them to control for group factors such as social support, thus assuming these elements to be absent from MBSR. Yet other MBI literature advocates focusing on fostering group cohesion and developing specific group facilitation skills, placing group effects as central to MBIs efficacy (see McCown, Reibek & Micozzi, 2010). Within their evaluation of an apprenticeship model of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) training within the United Kingdom's National Health Service, Marx, Strauss and Williamson (2015) highlight the value mindfulness teacher trainees place upon learning about and developing skills in managing group processes. Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell and Williams (2010) place skills in managing the group process as one of the six domains of teacher competency in their article on training mindfulness teachers. They acknowledge the core principle of teaching mindfulness to be modelling a being rather than doing mode of mind to participants (Crane et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and bringing this principle to managing group processes is advocated in key teacher training literature (McCown et al., 2010).

New theory is needed to make links with existing group theory and to account for group processes that might be unique to MBIs. Structurally, MBI groups are closed, short-term, structured and psycho-educational (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, the group's function lacks clarity. Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2013) define MBIs as "psycho-educational," while other experienced clinicians argue that MBIs are not "group therapy", "psycho-education", or "classroom teaching" (McCown et al., 2010, p.104). Yet "group therapy" has been defined as using groups "for prevention, guidance, counseling and training" (Barlow, 2008, p.240), which

encompasses MBIs. Existing group theory has been developed to account for learning groups (Jaques and Salmon 2007) or psychotherapy groups that aim to bring about psychological change (Barnes, Ernst and Hyde 1999). As MBIs fulfil both functions, existing theory is not sufficient to understand the group experience and function in MBIs.

There is a clear need for better understanding about the role group processes play in MBIs. Due to the current lack of research in this area, the aim of this study was to develop a detailed theory answering three key questions: 1) How do group processes unfold during MBIs? 2) How does the experience of learning mindfulness as part of a group impact upon the individual experience? And 3) What qualities and skills might be required of teachers to facilitate beneficial group experiences? Our hope was that such knowledge would clarify any unique characteristics in MBI group processes, provide illumination on group processes to individuals commencing MBIs, support mindfulness teachers to maximise any benefits of the group format and be alert to potential pitfalls, and contribute to developing supervision frameworks for assessing teacher competencies.

Given our intention to generate new theory, grounded theory (GT), which supports the generation of theory derived from the data, was selected as an appropriate methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Willig, 2008). Epistemologically, the study took a critical realist perspective, seeking not to define an objective 'truth' of the role of group in MBIs, but to develop a theory transparently situated within the context of the researcher and participants' co-created meaning (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This position enabled consideration of how participants constructed their experience of learning mindfulness in a group through language whilst taking account of their 'real', or embodied, experience of being in a group (Stanley 2012a; 2012b).

Method

Recruitment

Dulcie Cormack approached a number of MBI teachers and trainers by email, or in person at mindfulness conferences, and provided information about the study. She requested that they pass the information on to colleagues and to MBI course students from within the last 18 months. This time period was selected to capture accounts from recent MBI course participants and also from those who had additional time to process and reflect on their experiences. From the pool of interested respondents, participants were recruited into the study according to theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007).

Ethics

The study obtained full ethical approval from the Salomons Ethics Panel at Canterbury Christchurch University and adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2006). Although the interview schedule did not include any questions likely to be of a sensitive nature, participants were advised not to take part in the study if they were currently experiencing high levels of psychological distress. Furthermore, the interview schedule was developed in consultation with an expert by experience (EBE); a mental-health service user with MBI experience, to maximise the clarity and sensitivity of question phrasing. The EBE was part of the Salomons Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE).

Quality Assurance Methods

Quality assurance was incorporated into the study's design in the form of participant triangulation, where data are collected from multiple sources (i.e. students, teachers and trainers) to incorporate the full range of perspectives on the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This approach increases the credibility of grounded theory methodologies (Sikolia, Biros, Mason & Weiser, 2013). Further, the constant comparative method within GT enabled cross-

referencing between data to reduce bias towards one perspective (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In accordance with traditional GT methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in depth exploration of group theory and a detailed literature review of relevant mindfulness research were conducted after analysis was complete to minimise the impact of existing ideas during analysis. Dulcie, who conducted all data collection and analysis, strove to work inductively and to 'bracket' positive assumptions and prior theoretical knowledge (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) to ensure that emerging theory was grounded in the study's data. For example, Dulcie engaged in regular reflexive discussions with Fergal Jones and Michael Maltby throughout the research process on our existing beliefs and biases relating to our research topic. During data collection, analysis and reporting, we specifically explored data for disadvantages to counter our potential bias towards the benefits of group membership. Finally, in an attempt to ensure the study displayed the characteristics of good qualitative research, we were guided by Yardley's (2000) criteria: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. This was achieved through making reference to these criteria through the research processes and in discussion between us to ensure adherence.

Participants

There were twelve participants (N=12), of whom eight were female. They ranged in age from 27 to 67 years (mean = 45.6; median = 42) and all identified as ethnically white British, apart from one participant who identified as white American. To capture the experience of the group from multiple perspectives, six of the participants had attended a community-based MBI (MBCT n=3; MBSR n=3) as a student within the previous 14 months (range of two to 14 months); two participants were mindfulness teachers with 3 ¾ and 4 ½ years of clinical experience respectively; and four were both teachers and trainers of teachers with a range of 6 to 12 years experience. The trainers each continued to work as teachers of MBIs in addition to delivering post-graduate level

mindfulness-teacher training. All teachers and trainers at least met the recommended criteria for 'basic teacher training' as outlined in Crane et al. (2010, p.80). Henceforth, participants are referred to as 'students' if they took part in an MBI, and the term 'participants' is reserved for the full sample. Four students disclosed past experiences of anxiety and/or depression as a contributing factor in their decision to join an MBI. One student had taken part in an MBI to help manage chronic pain, and another to help manage work-related stress.

Procedure

Interviews

After obtaining informed consent, Dulcie explored each participant's experiences of the group aspect of mindfulness courses via a semi-structured interview, lasting between 45 to 90 minutes. The questions encouraged participants to think back to their experiences of being in a group as the course progressed (e.g. 'Can you remember the first couple of weeks on the course/a recent course you have taught? What was it like being in the group initially?), and also during particular learning contexts utilised in MBIs (i.e. the group inquiry process and the experience of group meditation). Students were asked to give examples of specific situations from their MBI, and teachers and trainers were invited to draw upon recently facilitated groups and training programmes as well as their more general experience. Emergent themes from earlier interviews (e.g. 'safety') were explored in greater depth with subsequent participants, in keeping with GT methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data analysis

Following GT guidelines, data analysis began simultaneously to data collection, facilitating the refinement of later interviews around emerging theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Substantive coding of data was employed, beginning with line-by-line open coding of interviews supported by

theoretical memos documenting coding decisions and conceptual links between codes. As coding

progressed, patterns developed through constant comparison between codes (Urquhart, 2013).

Thus conceptual categories emerged and were further explored in subsequent interviews,

facilitating the development of the emergent theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Our approach to theoretical sampling was to commence with interviewing students and

teachers/trainers in turn, on the assumption that this would best support comparison and

contrasting of data. However, our first interview with a student yielded largely negative group

experiences, which we ultimately viewed as a negative case (Morse, 2007). This data set provided

a contrast to the largely positive experiences of the other eleven participants. We elected to

subsequently interview another student for comparison with our first case. Our third interview was

with a teacher/trainer. Due to the richness of this teacher's insights based on many years of

teaching and training in mindfulness, the early emergence of a preliminary theoretical model was

apparent. Consequently we elected to interview teachers and trainers until no further categories

developed from the data. We then returned to interviewing students, essentially checking our

emergent theory against their responses. After three further interviews, we deemed we had reached

theoretical saturation (Dey, 1999; Holton, 2007). We conducted one final student interview to

confirm this.

Results

A grounded theory describing participants' experiences of MBI groups is presented below.

A core category, and three higher-order categories each encompassing a number of categories and

sub-categories evolved from the data, forming a theory describing the group processes in MBIs.

The core category is the group as a vessel on a communal journey. Sailing and journeying

metaphors permeate subsequent categories. The higher-order categories are 1) charting the course,

2) building and sailing the group vessel, and 3) communal experiences (see Table 1). The first two

higher-order categories were closely interlinked with the tasks loosely corresponding to certain

stages. A diagram of the theory is presented in Figure 1.

<u>---Figure 1, about here please.---</u>

Core category: The group as a vessel on a shared journey

The core category was of the group as an essential vessel, or boat, on which participants

share their journey of mindfulness. With one exception (a student), all participants felt the group

was central to learning mindfulness and said they would recommend a group format. Multiple

participants used sailing metaphors and synonyms when describing MBIs, creating an image of

students and their respective teachers as crew members sailing together in the group vessel under

the guidance of an experienced captain:

> "So people have got a strong sense that they're on a journey together with somebody at the
>
> helm. So I think that gives people a context then to share what they're learning on the
>
> journey." (teacher).

The notion of being on a shared journey with other group members was recurrent, and used

as an overarching metaphor for the entire MBI experience. One trainer suggested that the journey

of learning mindfulness relies upon "launch[ing] the vessel that is the group", and without it

"actually people can't do the work they've come to do".

Higher-order category one: Charting the course

A clear picture emerged from participants of their experiences of the group following a

characteristic course across the eight-week course, which was categorised into five stages. Firstly,

participants described a forecast stage before meeting their group, where students speculated about

their future MBI group experience. Participants depicted concerns regarding joining the group,

such as whether it would feel too big, or whether they would feel able to contribute. Their hopes were to learn from others and to experience a "collective effort to make yourself feel better" (student). When participants met for the first time, they moved into the embarking stage. This stage (weeks one to three) was defined by feelings amongst students of nervousness, uncertainty, concern about their impact on each other (e.g. inhibiting each other in speaking), and also curiosity:

"…lots of nervousness, lots of is it alright, what's going on, am I safe, who are these other people, what's the teacher like, what am I allowed to say, am I going to be forced to do things I don't want to do" (trainer).

Next there was the spectrum stage (weeks three to five), incorporating contrasting experiences between group members, ranging from 'getting it' to struggling, and moving between these positions. Indeed, teachers and trainers described actively encouraging "a full spectrum of responses" from students. One student described a "dip" when a "lot of people seemed to be struggling and had hit a kind of point where they weren't quite sure if this actually was going to do any good". A trainer specified week five as the "climax week" describing it as "a stormy session". At the same time, participants described increasing cohesiveness, safety and trust within the group.

The penultimate stage was knowing the ropes, occurring in weeks six and seven and coinciding with a full day of largely silent mindfulness practice. This stage was characterised by the consolidation of skills and of group cohesiveness:

"[The full day of silent meditation is] always a turning point in their practice but I began to see it as a real turning point in the group process as well … there was a real sense of connection and warmth and joy in week seven that hadn't been there [before]" (trainer).

Finally, the group entered the disembarking stage, which participants described as characterised by warmth, camaraderie, and a deep connection between group members.

Participants also described this stage as sad, as group members began to mourn the end of the course and the loss of the group, expressing the wish that that group could continue meeting, and concerns about continuing mindfulness practice alone. However, there was also a sense of being ready for the group's shared journey to end.

The student who had had a less positive experience overall described a similar experience to other students at the forecast and embarking stages. Thereafter, he often referred to the absence of components recognized by other participants within his own mindfulness course. For example, in describing the end of the course, he said "people probably were a bit more comfortable with each other but the atmosphere was a bit stiff. A bit quiet." He did not describe the collective energy or camaraderie portrayed by other participants.

Higher-order category two: Building and sailing the group vessel

Participants described the experience of learning mindfulness as enriched by the communal experience, and conceptualised the group as a vessel that enables this shared journey. Data analysis found five ways in which participants felt the teacher could build a sturdy vessel was keep the boat to course. In Figure 1, this is diagrammatically represented as the layers of the boat's hull, essential to its seaworthiness.

Firstly, data analysis found participants recognised the need for the teacher's interactions with the group as a whole to be conducted from a position of embodiment. Embodiment is the teacher's capacity to maintain and teach from a position of mindful awareness, thereby modeling the application of mindfulness to MBI participants (Crane et al., 2010). In the context of the group, this required teachers to embody mindfulness through bringing multi-layered attention, a non-judgemental attitude and a non-reactive, observing stance to the group, particularly when managing common group work challenges. For example, one teacher/trainer talked about his surprise at positive feedback from other group members on his management of a group member he

described as extremely restless and challenging. He felt the reason for this had been his capacity to remain embodied:

> "A number of people in the feedback said "I was really impressed by how you and the other teacher managed the group" … I didn't feel like we handled it brilliantly, but [group members] seemed to be really impressed that we hadn't reacted, we hadn't lost her, we just held it and held her."

The student who had found his MBI experience less positive than other participants offered a contrasting view. He talked of feeling his struggles to attend the course due to chronic pain were not met with an accepting, or non-judgemental (and thus embodied) attitude:

> "…it was always like "why weren't you here?". I don't know, it just wasn't done quite right, and made me feel slightly guilty and I just thought, "sod off!""

Secondly, participants felt teachers need to establish the safety of the group in the initial weeks for learning to take place. In particular, teachers and trainers suggested that students could only learn mindfulness if they felt safe enough within the group to get in touch with their vulnerabilities through mindfulness practice. The main threat to safety was fear of exposure, in terms of whether students would have to speak more than they wanted to and/or become overwhelmed by emotions during group sessions. Participants proposed three ways for teachers to build safety: a) setting clear boundaries (e.g. keeping to time, closed group membership, rules of group confidentiality); b) giving explicit permission for students to talk or not to talk; and c) presenting themselves as a confident leader who knows how to sail the course.

Thirdly, teachers need to build the culture of the group by facilitating connections between group members and managing communication within the group, particularly in early sessions. Students described getting to know you exercised in early sessions as beneficial to participating in small and large group work: "I think it was useful that we all spent a couple of minutes talking

about our background at the start because it just sort of brings people to life really." The manner of verbal communication in mindfulness groups was perceived as unique, and something which took several sessions to become versed in: "…people got better at knowing how to express what had happened over the week before" (student). Participants defined the purpose and form of communication as "not therapy", "social chit-chat" or "theorizing", but "a space where you explore the immediacy of your experience" (trainer).

Fourthly, participants talked about teachers keeping an even keel whilst sailing the vessel, which occurred simultaneously and subsequent to establishing the group culture. Participants felt it important that teachers maintain equality between group members in terms of their contributions, and balance meeting the needs of individuals versus the needs of the group as a whole. For example, participants expressed the view that individual contributions should be helpful to the group as a whole: "[The] individual [is] in the service of the group" (teacher).   Indeed, students noticed and appreciated teachers paying attention to the relevance of individual contributions during inquiry with the group as a whole:

> "Where somebody's experience was valuable, I think [the teacher] would explore it. When somebody had kind of extinguished the amount of value that could have been provided for themselves and others, I think she would gently move it on."

Additionally, participants stated the importance of all group members having an equal right to talk and be heard: "There was no particular extra time spent on anybody. We had all given and pulled an equal opportunity" (student).

The fifth aspect of building and sailing the group vessel was that teachers facilitated students to have a turn at the wheel. Teachers and trainers noted their role becomes less active as the course progresses and group members become more skilled in using and talking about their

mindfulness practice. Thus, teachers and trainers noted allowing freer communication between group members and providing less guidance during mediation practices in the final week(s):

"You're training the other people on the boat as time goes on how to also steer the ship, and maybe later on they might take a turn at the wheel" (trainer).

Higher-order category three: Communal experiences

The final higher-order category to develop from the data was of shared experiences and their impact upon the experience of learning mindfulness. With one exception, participants' described a range of benefits they perceived the group to provide.

Firstly, participants described a number of benefits of a shared journey, derived through verbal interaction during inquiries. They felt less alone due to developing a sense of belonging and connection with the group, which fostered an understanding of suffering as universal. They talked of how supportive and motivating it was for group members to share in each other's successes and inspire mutual hope for the benefits of maintaining mindfulness practice. Participants talked of individual positive experiences being magnified and/or transferred to the group and of learning from others, such as gaining practical tips, a new perspective or clarification. Participants talked of the relief and reassurance derived from discovering that one's own struggle, be it with depression, the mind wandering, or the inability to motivate oneself, is normal and experienced by others. Participants also talked about group members making comparisons with one another, consequently perceiving their own position to be more manageable: "I know that I have my faults, but I thought I'm so lucky not to be plagued by some of the thoughts that people have" (student).

Secondly, participants described community in meditation, characterized by feelings of connectedness, togetherness and solidarity, and fostered through participants' non-verbal experiences during meditation practice. Participants tried to explain the feeling of meditating in a group, but found it hard to put into words: "It's quite a hard thing to articulate I think" (student).

However, descriptions recurrently offered were of a collective energy, warmth, calmness or tranquillity. Participants felt that they were able to go deeper when meditating in a group compared to meditating alone, describing it as a richer experience. Participants found group participation a motivating factor, describing group meditation as easier than home practice.

Thirdly, participants gave examples of ways in which the group provided them with opportunities to practise their mindfulness skills in vivo. For example, one trainer spoke about a course she had facilitated in which one member of the group had been very critical of the intervention and had frequently cut across other members of the group to say how unhelpful mindfulness was. She perceived this to create an opportunity for other group members to practise their skills in response to a 'live' difficulty. Indeed, some students talked about how their own judgement of others on their MBI group provided material to practise mindfulness skills. For example, a student described noticing her internal judgements of others mid-session and how this provided her with in vivo mindfulness practice:

> "You notice the people that are having difficulty keeping still… …and the immediate impulse to judge that. "Oh I could sit still but they couldn't". And noticing these sorts of things."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory of the role of the group in MBIs. The theory we developed suggests that both MBI teachers and students perceive group processes as powerful and essential to the MBI experience. We found that when teachers build a safe and supportive group environment from a position of embodiment, students journey through a characteristic set of stages of group experience and benefit from communal experiences that enrich their learning of mindfulness.

Several aspects of our theory parallel findings from previous qualitative research into MBIs, and existing theory regarding group interventions more broadly. Our core category, the group as a vessel on a communal journey, is analogous with Langdon et al.'s core category "The Journey of Mindfulness" (2011, p. 274). Our participants, however, conceptualised their journey as shared, rather than individual. This was likely due to our study's focus upon experiences during the 8-week course whereas Langdon et al. explored participants' attempts to integrate their mindfulness practice into daily life after completing their MBI. Within our category benefits of being on a shared journey, many of the sub-categories described parallel Yalom's group psychotherapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). For example, Yalom's 'universality' describes the relief at learning you are not alone in experiencing your difficulties, thus one is normal and can be understood by others. Our sub-categories of normalizing, comparisons, not alone and universality of human suffering can all be recognised in this description. The benefits described within this category have also been recognized in previous qualitative research into the experience of taking part in MBIs (Allen, Bromley, Kuyken & Sonnenberg, 2009; Chambers, Foley, Galt, Ferguson & Clutton, 2012; Finucane & Mercer, 2006; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2009; Mason & Hargreaves, 2001; Smith, Gragan & Senthinathan, 2007). The

development of a sense of group cohesion in MBIs, described in our subcategory community in meditation, has been noted in prior qualitative studies (Chambers et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Mackenzie, Carlson, Munoz & Speca, 2007), as have participants' concerns related to the disembarking stage about continuing practice without the support of the group (Allen et al., 2009; Langdon et al., 2011). The first higher-order category of our MBI group theory, charting the course, established the MBI group experience to progress through distinct stages. This process parallels Johnson and Johnson's sequential-state theory (2006) of group development. Built upon Tuckman's much-cited 'forming', 'storming', 'norming', performing' and 'adjourning' model of small group development (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), the sequential-state theory was developed to account for learning groups where the leader or facilitator takes an active role in directing the group process. These examples of triangulation with prior qualitative research and theory add credibility and validity to our theory.

A number of factors described within our theory are specific to the MBI group experience, thus provide insight into how the MBI group experience differ from descriptions of generic group processes. Firstly, our spectrum stage within higher-order category one does not find that group members are attempting to differentiate themselves from the group as a whole or rebel against the leader as described by existing stage-theories; i.e. Tuckman (1965)'s storming stage, or 'rebelling and differentiating' in Johnson and Johnson (2006). The struggle, or storming, described within the spectrum stage appears related to the MBI course curriculum at the halfway point, which focuses on mindfully turning one's attention towards difficult experiences and developing acceptance towards them (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2013). Thus, rather than a storming between participants or a leadership struggle, the storm can be perceived as participants' individual, internal battle for which the MBI course content is the catalyst. This struggle shapes the whole group experience and requires the teacher to support students in sharing and mindfully

accepting their experiences. How, or if, this struggle unfolds in an individual experience of learning mindfulness could not be explored within this study, but we can speculate that without the community of the group it would be harder for students to work through this challenging stage of turning towards difficulty and thus deepen their mindfulness practice. Indeed, this may be captured in Malpass et al., (2012)'s meta-ethnographic study where they describe group processes as an important motivating and supportive force as students face long-standing internal patterns and begin to shift towards using new mindfulness skills.

Secondly, many aspects of our category benefits of a shared journey correspond to Yalom's classic group therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, we would argue that normalizing has an additional depth in the context of the MBI group. Participants talked about how they learn from others that their own internal experience (e.g. of the mind wandering, or of self-criticism) is normal and experienced by others. For participants, the process of exploring struggles in inquiry and then meditating together with people who might be having these experiences at that very moment seemed to bring an additional depth to their experience of normalizing. This suggests that exploring these issues in inquiry following within-session meditation practices and drawing links between shared group experiences is important to facilitate students in reaching a deeper level of understanding of core mindfulness principles.

Thirdly, within our second higher-order category, participants talked repeatedly about the unique nature of communication within MBI groups and the need for guidance in learning how to talk within the inquiry process. This has been described elsewhere as 'Mindful-Talk' (Cormack, 2009); a way of talking within mindful inquiry with a characteristic slow, spacious structure and content that adheres to core mindfulness principles. However, participants also stressed the importance of silence within their MBI experience, and of having permission not to talk. Indeed, Mackenzie et al. (2007) observed group cohesion to develop primarily through non-verbal shared

experience, rather than talking. The Buddhist concept of the non-self may be pertinent here: the idea that it is our attachment to our self as a 'real' entity that leads to our suffering, and letting go of the illusion of self (which might also be termed our identity or ego) frees us from this suffering (Epstein, 1995). In social constructionist terms our self is constructed through language, and meditation enables the "softening and dissolving of Self [by helping us to] break the spell of language as a map or picture of the real … to see the possibility that one's understandings are not demanded by "what there is," but are means of constructing it for some human purpose" (Gergen & Hosking, 2006, p.6-15). Arguably, therefore, the silence of meditation and the permission in MBIs to talk or not to talk supports the relinquishing of a self constructed through talk. The group format in MBIs may therefore provide an experience where participants can be with others without having to present or maintain a self. The unique focus in MBIs on connecting with oneself and others in silent meditation offers a group experience that participants appeared to value greatly. Indeed, participants' descriptions of silent group meditation formed our community in meditation category. In addition to drawing parallels with Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) concept of cohesion, this category can be related to the Buddhist concept of sangha. The sangha refers to an interdependent, Buddhist community that provides mutual support to live a mindful and spiritual life (Prebish & Keown, 2010). Thích Nhât Hanh, a renowned Vietnamese Buddhist monk, states that "Sangha has a collective energy. Without this energy, the practice of individual transformation is not easy" (2003, p.7). This framework for understanding participants' accounts of mindfulness meditation as supported by, and strengthened through, their connection with others in the group substantiates an alternative discourse of mindfulness as an interdependent, relational process. Such definitions of mindfulness contrast with cognitive and neuropsychological perspectives, which conceptualise mindfulness as "an inner psychological construct, existing as an unobservable state

or trait, residing within the mind/body/brain" (Stanley 2012a p. 2), and demonstrate the importance of viewing the group processes in MBIs as integral to their efficacy.

In providing this interdependent, relational experience of mindfulness, the experience of learning mindfulness as part of a group appears to significantly augment the individual learning experience. In addition, our theory has illustrated how the MBI specific normalization process and the community in meditation deepen and enrich the individual journey. It is difficult to see how studying mindfulness individually using books, CDs, or even working one-to-one with a mindfulness teacher, could provide comparable experiences. Imel et al.'s (2008) study argued that the effects for MBSR do not only occur on an individual level, but on a group level; a group effect accounting for 7% of the variance in outcome. Our theory provides substance to this finding by illustrating a range of both generic and MBI specific group factors that enhance individual learning and the overall positive impact of the MBI experience.

Implications

This study supports the view that the group plays a vital role in facilitating the learning of mindfulness skills. The group provides participants with the opportunity to learn from each other both explicitly and implicitly, enhances participants' experience of MBIs through providing a supportive mindfulness community, and provides opportunity for in vivo practice of mindfulness skills. Our study also suggests ways in which mindfulness teachers can optimise group processes and thereby enhance students' experiences of learning mindfulness: 1) The skill of the teacher in managing the group processes from a position of embodiment appears to be central to facilitating optimal learning conditions. This supports the view that mindfulness teachers need to have an established mindfulness practice and continuing professional development focussed on developing

group facilitation skills (Crane et al., 2010; Crane, Kuyken, Williams, Hastings, Cooper & Fennel, 2012). 2) Teachers need to pay particular attention to the spectrum stage, where students can be expected to collectively 'storm' against their own psychological processes and express resistance to turning towards them. Supervision may be helpful in supporting teachers to remain embodied in their responses to the group during this challenging phase. 3) During the inquiry process, teachers should pay particular attention to making explicit links between similarities in students' in-the-moment experiences to deepen the process of normalizing one's internal experiences. 4) Mindfulness teachers should pay particular attention not only setting clear group boundaries and providing guidance in 'mindful-talk', but also to providing their students with clear permission to both talk and to not talk during their MBI. 5) The study's findings demonstrate that the full day of silent practice in MBIs supports group cohesion and, therefore, the consolidation of mindfulness skills. This suggests the full day should be promoted as a core component of all MBIs and conceptualised as central to the group processes. 6) Our findings support the view that group skills should be assessed as a core teacher competency (Crane et al., 2010), and the theory outlined in this article could be utilised as a framework for use in training, supervision and assessment.

In terms of future research, robust quantitative research is now required to ascertain whether or not a group format enhances efficacy, compared to individual delivery, and whether group variables mediate outcomes. In view of the increase in options for self-study or one-to-one study of mindfulness, randomized control trials comparing these different formats would be worthwhile. A longitudinal study exploring the relationship between group processes and maintenance of mindfulness practice in the long-term would also be beneficial. The role of the full day of silent practice within this relationship should also be considered. Further qualitative research could usefully investigate students' experiences of the spectrum stage and turning

towards difficulties in week 5 (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2013) and make comparisons between group and individual learning contexts.

It is also important to consider one participant's negative experience of the group. This student was our only participant with a chronic health condition. Our analysis suggests that his teacher lacked important skills and characteristics, such as embodiment, in her response to the group. However, it may also be that his struggles with the group were linked with his physical health condition. This would support Fitzpatrick, Simpson and Smith's (2010) contention that people with degenerative illnesses are more likely to experience the group setting negatively. Further research could build upon our model to explore variance in group experiences for people with different conditions.

Limitations

The sample in this study was small, culturally homogenous and self-selected, with participants predominantly sharing positive experiences of the group and purporting to have an interest in group processes. Therefore, the findings have limited generalizability and research with more diverse, larger samples is needed. Furthermore, the MBIs upon which participants' group experiences were drawn were 'primary-care' level interventions. Group experiences within more complex clinical settings may differ. Additionally, this study was not able to take into account previous experience of groups, which are likely to have influenced participants' expectations and experiences regarding the MBI group. This may impact upon the reliability of our findings.

All data was from interviews exploring participants' retrospective experiences. We interviewed students who had participated in an MBI in the previous 2 to 14 months. We found all accounts to be rich and sufficiently similar in terms of emergent themes, thus supporting the use of

this time frame. We found retrospective interview data to be worthwhile as participants had had time to process their experiences, and it enabled teachers and trainers to draw upon their experiences of multiple MBIs. However, students interviewed with the longest time period since their MBI did place slightly less emphasis on the importance of the group than the other students interviewed. This may indicate that the benefits of group membership have an optimal time period, but was beyond the scope of this study to explore this further.

For ethical reasons, we did not explore students' personal or clinical reasons for taking part in an MBI. This limited us in terms of developing a theory that might have accounted for how different clinical presentations might impact on the group experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a theory of the group processes specific to mindfulness-based interventions; how the processes unfold during the MBCT or MBSR programme, the qualities and skills required of the teacher, and the participants' experiences of learning within a group context. Some elements of our theory triangulate with existing group theory and prior research, whilst others illustrate MBI-specific group processes. Learning mindfulness within a group is shown to enrich students' experiences and appears to lead to deeper understanding, motivation, and assimilation. Teachers can best support positive group processes by bringing the quality of embodiment and being mindful of the groups' needs, as described in our theory, at different stages in the shared journey. This study was relatively small-scale and findings may have limited generalisability. But it has demonstrated that the role and experience of group processes in MBIs deserve further research to explore the efficacy of group MBI versus individual formats, as well as the links between group processes and the maintenance of mindfulness longer-term.

Funding

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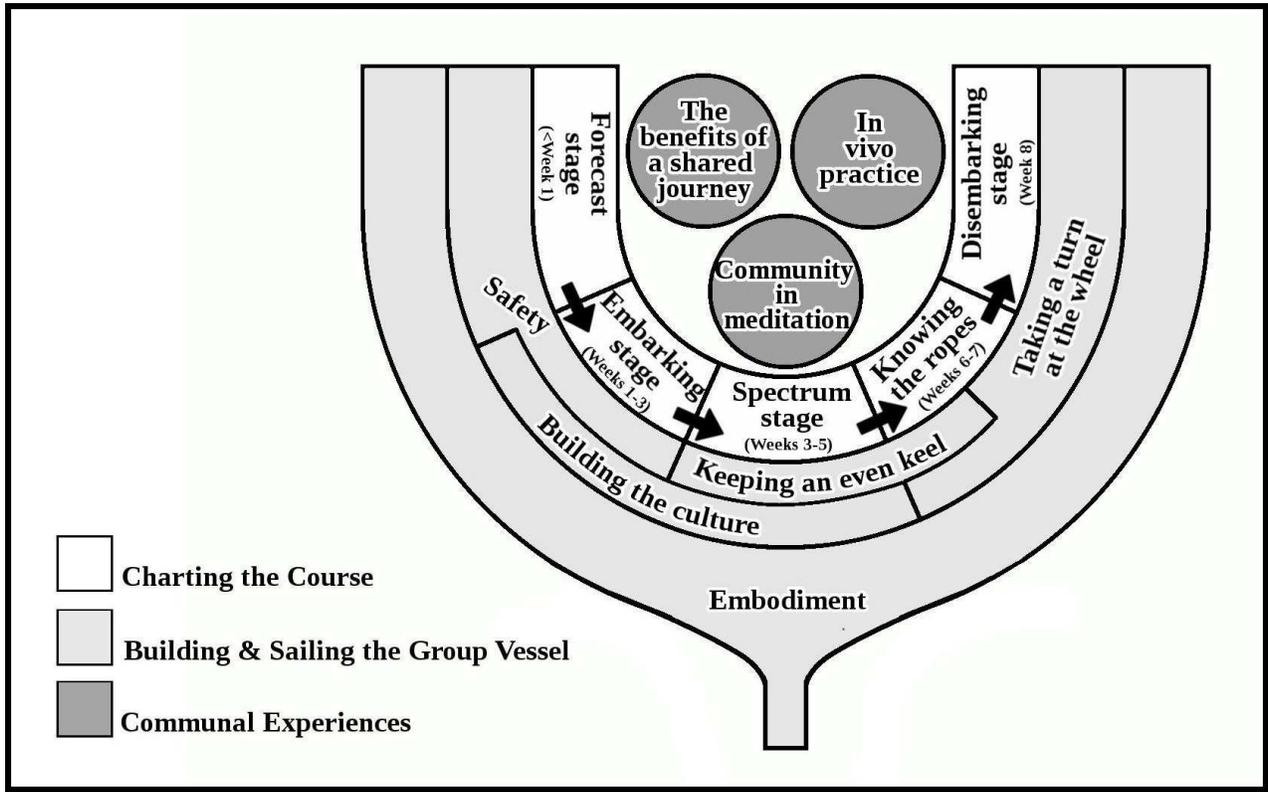
Figure 1:

Table 1: Categories forming the grounded theory of the role of the group in mindfulness-based interventions

Higher-order category	Category	Sub-category
1. Charting the Course	Forecast stage	Pre-course concerns
		Pre-course hopes
	Embarking stage	Nervousness and uncertainty
		Concern about impact of and on others
		Curiosity about others
	Spectrum stage	Getting it
		Struggling
		Developing cohesion
	Knowing the ropes	Consolidation of skills
		Consolidation of group connection
	Disembarking stage	Warmth
		Sadness
		Ready for group to end
		Concerns about continuing practice alone
2. Building & Sailing the Group Vessel	Safety	Setting boundaries
		Fear of exposure
		Permission to talk or not to talk
		A leader at the helm
	Building the culture	Facilitating connections
		Managing communication
	Keeping on an even keel	Equality
		Group v. individual
	Having a turn at the wheel	Freer communication
		Less guidance in meditations
	Embodiment	Non-judgemental acceptance
		Multi-layered attention
		Non-reactive observation
3. Communal Experiences	The benefits of a shared journey	Sharing and magnifying positives
		Learning from each other
		Normalizing
		Comparisons
		Not alone

	Universality of human suffering
Community in meditation	Connectedness
	Motivation
	Energy of the group
	Hard to articulate
In vivo practice	Group experience provides material
	Own judgements of others provide material