An Autoethnography of a Working-Class Gay Woman Becoming a Mindfulness Teacher

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And finally, to anyone living this story, we do belong.

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed *L. Wheeler* (Lynne Wheeler - candidate)

Date 19th September 2020

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed *L. Wheeler* (Lynne Wheeler - candidate)

Date 19th September 2020

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for interlibrary loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Contents

Abstract

Although the benefits of mindfulness based programmes are well documented, there is increasing awareness of the absence of practitioners and teachers from diverse backgrounds within the mindfulness community. Evidence suggests there are health and well-being benefits associated with mindfulness for people who are marginalised, however, there is little research into their experience within mindfulness spaces, thus minimal knowledge as to why they are underrepresented. This study, in the form of an autoethnographic enquiry, begins to address the gap by exploring the experience of a working-class gay woman as she becomes a mindfulness teacher. The study found there are difficulties within mindfulness spaces, due to being gay and working class, that may not be noticed by those who do not belong to these marginalised groups. The study shows that group members need to feel a sense of belonging to the group to benefit from mindfulness practice. It also highlights the value in seeing others who identify as LGBT within mindfulness spaces, and in positions of leadership such as group facilitators. The study recommends further research with a wider participant sample, including exploring the benefits of LGBT specific mindfulness groups, and expanding the research into the benefits of identity specific mindfulness groups for other marginalised communities.

Introduction

Mindfulness-Based Programmes (MBP's) such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) offer people a different way of relating to experience in order to reduce suffering associated with various issues such as chronic pain and depression (Crane et al., 2017). MBP's are primarily taught in groups over eight sessions and involve a bringing together of people, potentially from all walks of life. Practicing mindfulness invites participants to be in touch with each moment and challenge of life in a non-judgemental way, allowing life to be lived more consciously, enhancing kindness to ourselves and the outside world (Brandsma, 2017). Developing mindfulness practice as part of a group can provide motivation, clarification, and a more rounded view of the experience through the interaction with others in the group alongside the guidance of a skilled teacher (Crane et al., 2017). The group can provide an exploration of an individual experience on a deeper level than could be experienced alone.

In general, group participants will come to MBP's to learn about mindfulness with little prior knowledge or experience of the practice and given that people learn best in a safe environment, it is vital to spend time creating a safe environment to conduct the MBP (Brandsma, 2017). Each session will include the teacher guiding mindfulness practices, followed by an enquiry (discussion and exploration of the practice), conducted by the teacher, enquiry into group participants home practice, and some didactic teaching (Woods et al., 2019). The style of learning in a MBP is experiential, meaning learning through experience and reflection, consequently participants need to feel safe enough to allow themselves to be vulnerable to be seen and heard in the group in order to learn.

One way safety is created in the group is in the establishment of connection with each other to allow participants to open up to themselves and others. Brandsma (2017) acknowledges that group members may be on their guard when they first arrive in a group and relate to the other group members as “they”. As participants interact and get to know each other this can become “we”. Session one in MBP’s will usually involve some kind of interactive introduction exercise to allow participants to begin to get to know each other, giving something of themselves, to establish the connection.

The connection between group participants and the teacher also provides a source of safety with the teacher connecting with group participants in a very human and authentic way (Wolf & Serpa, 2015). Many MBP participants say that it is the human quality of the teacher, embodying the very qualities they are teaching, that sows the seeds of possibility in them (Crane, 2017). An embodied teacher brings more than a cognitive understand of mindfulness to the class, they are a model of the practice for participants (Woods et al., 2019). Embodiment of mindfulness, inhabiting attitudinal foundations of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) such as non-judging, trust, and acceptance, developed through their own practice, is seen as a crucial quality in a mindfulness teacher (Crane, 2017). This is perhaps one way that the teacher is able to establish a connection with group participants thereby fostering a sense of safety and belonging, enabling participants to begin to feel the benefits of mindfulness for their mental health and wellbeing.

The demand for MBP’s in recent years has grown at a considerable rate and with it an enormous growth in research into MBP’s (Crane et al., 2017). Much of the research reflects positive benefits on participants mental and physical health, however, mindfulness research over samples middle to upper class, white women making it unclear as to whether these benefits can generalise to a more diverse population (Chin et

al., 2019). Many researchers in the mindfulness field are waking up to this lack of diversity within MBP's and Mindfulness Teacher Training Programmes (MTTP's) (Crane, 2018; Evans, 2018). Whilst there is limited research into mindfulness and class, it is beginning to be acknowledged that the Western mindfulness-based world is predominantly white, professional, middle class people with a lack of representation from the working classes or low Socio-economic Backgrounds (SEB's) (Power, 2019). A narrative review conducted by Chin et al., (2019) addressing diversity in mindfulness research on health, found that despite there being positive outcomes for people from low SEB's on their levels of stress, there was an exceedingly high dropout rate from this population. It was felt that this was due to the high cost barrier of MBP's, not just financial but also childcare and high time commitment, while those from a higher social class have more finances and time available to them (Chin et al., 2019).

It is acknowledged that those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT), experience poorer mental health compared to those who identify as heterosexual due to increased levels of isolation and discrimination (Chakraborty et al., 2011). Whilst there are a number of studies discussing the health benefits of mindfulness for the LGBT community, there is a paucity of empirical research into the experience within MBP's and MTTP's for those who identify as LGBT. The discussions are, however, beginning to take place within blog pieces, conferences, and workshops. Still, some people in wider society are of the opinion that sexuality is no longer an issue due to the shift in legislation and equal marriage rights for the LGBT community (Bindel, 2014).

The term heteronormativity describes a culture that frames people as heterosexual unless proven otherwise (Warner, 1991). In a society where heterosexuality is assumed, it can be impossible for those who do identify as

heterosexual to notice the everyday moments of heteronormativity that can marginalise those who identify as anything other than heterosexual, leading them to feel disregarded and inferior (Adams, 2011). In a heteronormative society, anyone who identifies as heterosexual has no need to disclose their sexuality as this is already assumed, which leads to the often stated belief that anyone who does not identify as heterosexual makes an issue of their sexuality while heterosexuals do not (Signorile, 1993). However, where heterosexuality is assumed, non-heterosexuals are faced with the burden of deciding whether to self-disclose with every new encounter (Liang, 1997). A new job, new doctor, new landlord, striking up a conversation in a café, attending a course; all situations where heterosexuality may be assumed in a heteronormative culture and has the potential for those who identify as non-heterosexual to have to decide if it is safe to self-disclose or better to deny this aspect of themselves in order to belong to the group.

As humans we have an innate need to belong to others in a group or community. Some groups we are born into and others are of our choosing, such as friendship groups and common interest groups. Nieto (2010) names nine social identities or contexts that people belong to: age, disability, religious culture, ethnicity, social class culture, sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender. Within these social identities, there will be those who are privileged within the group and those who are not. For instance, within the social class identity, privilege sits with those in the middle-upper classes as this opens door to education, owning property and increasing financial gain (Treleaven, 2017). As discussed previously in terms of sexuality, privilege is afforded to those who identify as heterosexual.

Research suggests that we all hold implicit biases, internalising stereotypes about others, noticing social differences and favouring those from the same groups as us (Treleaven, 2017). Crane (2018) has acknowledged the potential for internal bias to be

influencing those within MBP's and MTTP's leading to a lack of diversity within these groups. Education around the issue is not enough, the work to inform the change needs to be of a more personal nature which may reveal how mindfulness researchers, teachers and practitioners are potentially part of the problem (Crane, 2018). Acknowledging and being honest about our unconscious biases, can help to inform interventions and increase the capacity to empathise and connect with others (Treleaven, 2017).

In a salient blog post Roche (2019) acknowledges feeling like an outsider during her MTTP. She was not able to reveal her lesbian sexuality to the group as she did not trust the outcome. There was something about the experience that left her feeling unsafe to disclose this part of her identity whilst also leaving her with a sense of shame for withholding it. Roche (2019) acknowledges that being able to do so, would have led to a deeper experience, a fuller exploration of herself whilst also enabling others in the group to meet with their own biases.

The main aim of this autoethnographic study is to explore the researchers' experience of life as a working-class woman who identifies as gay, and how being part of these marginalised groups impacts on her experiences within MBP's and MTTP's. The hope is to give the reader a deep appreciation of the often unseen difficulties and obstacles that need to be navigated coming from a low SEB and identifying as anything other than heterosexual in a culture that is heteronormative, and how this may show up in MBP's and MTTP's.

Being a woman from a working-class (low SEB) background who identifies as gay, I have sensed many times in my daily life and within MBP's and MTTP's that I am an outsider, that I do not belong. I have felt the shame of not being able to afford the same things as my peers. I have felt guilty when discussing my sexuality has resulted in

others feeling awkward as they quickly shift the topic of conversation. I have felt sad and disappointed by the stark contrast that is revealed when those who identify as heterosexual can openly discuss their relationships but when I do there is a heaviness in the air. I feel I am well placed to contribute to the emerging conversations around the lack of diversity in mindfulness spaces and my intention is to give the reader a felt sense of life as a working-class gay woman, including experiences within MBP's and MTTP's. At the beginning of any process of change, there must be an acceptance of how things are right now (Miller, 2012). I hope that my commitment to be vulnerable by writing my story, brings a richness to these early conversations within the mindfulness field.

Method

Participants

The researcher is the only participant in the study as an autoethnographic approach is used. The researcher is a 49 year old white female, from a working-class background, who identifies as gay and uses the pronouns she and her. She has worked as a psychiatric nurse and group therapist for 20 years and became interested in MBP's in 2013. She teaches MBCT and co-facilitates a therapy group which integrates mindfulness and relational psychotherapy.

Research Design

This study follows an evocative autoethnographic design. Adams et al. (2015) describe an evocative autoethnography as a deep self-reflection by the researcher of their personal experience to describe a particular sub-culture and aims to evoke empathy in the reader, allowing them to be deeply moved by the story. An autoethnographer creates detailed, vivid, thick descriptions of life inside a sub-culture through the lens of their personal experience, in order to invite the reader into their world and facilitate a

deeper understanding (Chang, 2008). The enquiry into the sub-culture is grounded in personal experience so allowing the reader inside access to information that other research methods leave out or are unable to access (Jones et al., 2015). An autoethnography tells the life story of the researcher and sub-culture, as it is experienced by them, rather than what outsiders seek to know (Plumber, 2001). The challenge for the researcher with an autoethnographic approach, is to find the right balance between the "auto" and the "ethno" i.e.: the self and the sub-culture (Adams et al., 2017). The sub-cultures being investigated in this study are those of LGBT and working class (low SEB).

Autoethnography is a way of "being" and interacting with the world rather than merely knowing it and asks the writer to observe themselves observing (Ellis, 2013). Mindfulness invites us to let go of the constant mode of "doing" in our lives and enter into a "being" mode to allow a clearer seeing of each moment (Segal et al., 2013). As such the researcher believes the method of autoethnography is a natural choice to study MBP's. The researcher also believes an autoethnographic design is suited to the topic of this study as autoethnographers can begin to break silences by addressing understudied and/or sensitive subjects such as heteronormativity (Jones et al., 2013). Autoethnographers have been described as "edgewalkers" who are said to be people who walk between cultures, build bridges, and enable a new understanding between cultures to develop (Chang, 2008). The researcher hopes this can be the case with her study.

Procedure

The researcher conducted a literature search using Google Scholar search engine. Terms such as "heteronormativity" "low socio-economic background" "working class" "diversity and mindfulness" "LGBT" and "implicit bias" were used to

conduct the search and ground the researchers own research in the literature. While the researcher prefers the term “working class” many writers use the term “low-SEB” to mean the same thing. As such the researcher uses the terms interchangeably.

Personal memory provides the foundations for an autoethnography with the past giving rich context to the present (Chang, 2008). Therefore, the researcher produced data which informed the autoethnography by recalling and writing in a journal past experiences of her life in the context of being working-class and a gay woman, including experiences in mindfulness classes, retreats, and training. The researcher also produced data by documenting present experiences of life through the lens of being working class and a gay woman and within MBP’s and MTTP’s so kept an objective journal of these experiences as they occurred. The researcher also kept a subjective journal of her self-reflections of these experiences as well as her self-reflections of writing the autoethnography. Whist this added depth to the study, it also enabled the researcher to take care of herself as she was able to identify experiences for further reflection with her mindfulness supervisor.

Further data was generated by the researcher critically reflecting on current conversations with those within the sub-culture and wider society, as well as blog pieces, media articles, social media posts, television representation of the sub-culture and academic papers relating to the topic. This enabled her to compare her personal findings with the sub-cultures under study. The researcher also searched through audio and video recordings, and public and personal photographs to inform her study as significant experiences can be reproduced in the imagination by reviewing photographs of yourself (Jones et al., 2015).

Ethical Considerations

An ethics application (2019-16687) was submitted to the Bangor Psychology Ethics Committee and approved. The researcher was aware of the potential for her to become distressed due to the deep exploration involved in the study of her own past experiences as well as difficulties experienced by other members of the LGBT and low-SEB community. Writing an autoethnography has the potential to reignite painful feelings for the researcher, and the vulnerability inherent in this method of research can potentially illicit feelings of shame (Adams et al., 2015). To minimise the risk to herself, the researcher factored in time for breaks from the study, connected regularly with family, friends and peers, and utilised supervision with her thesis supervisor as well as with her mindfulness supervisor. The researcher also has a strong mindfulness practice to ground her and support clear seeing of her experiences. The researcher was open to access personal therapy if the need arose.

To limit any distress to others who may have informed the research and to maintain confidentiality, the researcher collapsed across stories so that no story is identifiable to an individual. Stories involving others were reflected on from the researcher's perspective and are her interpretation of the event. No conversations are written verbatim, rather the essence of a story is written from the researcher's personal, subjective lens. Others in the reflections are anonymised. Hard data such as diaries, journals and notes were stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home and electronic data was password protected within a password protected computer.

The researcher is aware of the possibility of shame being evoked in the reader due to identifying with the research either as a member of the LGBT or low-SEB community or identifying with those who have inadvertently caused distress due their inherent privilege of heteronormativity or higher social class. The researcher makes

clear that the intention of the research is to allow the reader into her world so that a greater understanding and welcoming of differences is developed, bridging the gap between self and other. According to Chang (2008), our view of others is not fixed but transforms as we are in contact with each other. Chang (2008) asserts that understanding the relationship between self and others is one of the tasks of autoethnographers. The main ethos when writing is to "do no harm" and the researcher kept this in mind throughout writing the autoethnography, particularly when reflecting on conversations with others.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation is how a researcher makes meaning of the gathered data and how it connects to the experiences of others and the existing research (Jones et al., 2013). In an autoethnographic study, data analysis and interpretation is not a linear process as the analysis really begins while the data is being collected with the analysis then revealing yet more relevant data (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation involves continually shifting focus back and forth between the self and the sub-culture the researcher is studying to provide an engaging and culturally meaningful autoethnography (Chang, 2008).

There are a wide range of approaches to data analysis and interpretation that can be employed within an autoethnographic study. Some researchers favour the analytical autoethnography which leans towards a more traditional research style with the writing heavily favouring social context and the existing research (Anderson, 2006). The imaginative-creative autoethnographic writing style takes research furthest away from a traditional academic writing approach (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographers who favour this style of research express themselves in a variety of creative forms such as poetry, drama, and painting.

In the confessional-emotive autoethnographic writing style, the researcher focuses on personal and relational issues and may illicit emotional responses and empathy in the reader (Jones et al., 2013). The researcher believes that this style of writing suits the topic her personal study, although was mindful of the danger that this could become too autobiographical in nature. To guard against this and ensure the study maintains its autoethnography status, the researcher maintained a triangular approach when documenting her experiences, keeping in mind throughout writing the three points of the triangle, namely: her personal experience, the experience of others in the sub-culture, and what is known on the topic from existing research. By keeping these three points in mind as her reference, the researcher remained grounded in the ethos of an autoethnography. Essentially the researcher drew on the essence of several writing styles to develop her own unique way to express her story, within the context of the sub-cultures of working class and LGBT as she becomes a mindfulness teacher. The writer developed her own style to strike a balance between being too personal on the one hand, and too distanced from the topic on the other. Chang (2008) emphasises the importance of autoethnographers developing their own style of writing to impart their interpretation of their life experiences in connection with others.

When reviewing data in personal journals, media posts, articles, memories and reflections, the researcher followed an inductive approach to allow for themes and patterns to emerge from within the data. The themes were compared to the literature and kept close to the researchers aims for the study. A reflective process became fundamental to the study, to ensure the most relevant data for the studies aims was included. A timeline of events was created to help the reflections. Analysis of the data was conducted by heuristic inquiry which can be described as a personal reflection leading to insights into the meaning of everyday life experiences (Douglass &

Moustakas, 1985). The researchers' reactions and responses by a deep reflection of feelings, emotions, thoughts, body sensations and behaviours were explored and analysed within her journal throughout this process.

During the interpretation stage of the study, some of the points the researcher kept in mind during several readings of the data were:

1. Are there explicit examples of homophobia or class prejudice?
2. Are there moments of heteronormativity?
3. Are there examples of things being said regarding LGBT sexuality that would not be said when referring to heterosexuality?
4. Are there moments when implicit bias may be at play?
5. Noticing somatic sense of "unbelonging".
6. Noticing somatic sense of shame being elicited.
7. Awareness of disclosing sexuality, the ongoing need to "come out".
8. Noticing moments of "knowing my place" in regard to class.

The findings from the reflections were interpreted by the researcher within the context of the main aims for the study leading to some data being reflected on at a deeper level and other data being discarded.

Results

I sit to begin to write and I freeze. I feel the familiar swell of doubt and fear rise in me. I feel a tightness throughout my body as the doubt and fear wants to keep me still. My breathing becomes short and unwelcome, betraying me with its movement. I close my eyes and purposefully breathe a deeper inbreath, encouraging my outbreath to slow and deepen with a steady, gentle blow. I release my jaw and my shoulders, and my thighs seem able to follow suit. I sit with an intention to meet this experience, to meet my fear and doubt, telling myself that my body, my emotions, have their own message

for me. Initially I assume that I am fearing my ability to write my story, doubting that I know how to write, how to begin. But this explanation does not seem to land with me in any meaningful way, so I sit a little longer, and breathe. I soon hear the words of doubt, "Who even are you to write this?" "Why would anyone want to read this?" "You're asking for too much" "Is this even needed?" And I realised; my doubt was not coming from my ability to write my story, but rather if I should write it at all! And so, I begin to reflect on times in my life when I felt my story, me, was not welcome.

The Ever Present Background Story

Am I Welcome?

The thread of feeling my story was unwelcome was evident from the beginning of my journey to finding my thesis topic. I read emails from the university inviting students to get in touch if they were interested in research the university wanted to explore, which included the apparent lack of diversity within the mindfulness community. I had an immediate, reflexive "no" reaction to that email. Familiar thoughts, feelings, and experiences of being ignored due to being in marginalised groups flashed through my mind. As a gay woman from a working-class background, underrepresented in the mindfulness community, everything in me rejected any suggestion that I could be part of researching the topic for the university, that anyone would be interested in what I had to say. My body braced and recoiled, and I was plagued with dismissive thoughts about being seen by others as moaning and asking for more than was rightfully mine. The strength of reaction surprised me, and I certainly noted its presence but paid it no further attention at the time.

It was a few weeks later when I came across two blog pieces exploring diversity in the mindfulness community, that my mind shifted dramatically from "I'm not doing that" to "I have to do that". Both authors wrote openly and honestly about their straight,

white, middle-class background affording them the privilege of a sense of belonging in the mindfulness community as all around them in the spaces were people like them (Crane, 2018; Evans, 2018). Both also reflected that whilst they had a part to play in addressing the lack of diversity in mindfulness spaces, they were not able to do the work justice on their own. They needed voices from diverse backgrounds with experience in the mindfulness community to be heard. In that moment I felt I had not only been given permission to tell my story, but it felt like I was being told it was a vital cog in the wheel of potential change. I was allowed and, more than that, wanted for my difference to the perceived norm within the mindfulness community.

Moving Beyond my Comfort Zone

The sense of being wanted and needed for being different to others is in stark contrast to many of my experiences within groups. I was 12 years old when I first became aware that some people would treat me different, as less than them, simply because of my social background. I was in the first year of secondary school and was exploring different friendship groups. I had come to the school from a small faith based primary school which was located in the middle of the council estate that I grew up in. It was the beginning of the 80's and I had not ventured far from my community. I went to school and played out with the same group of children. Our parents all knew each other; it was comfortable, and I had a strong sense that I belonged. I was part of a morris dancing troupe with many others from the estate, practicing once a week and competing with other troupes in carnivals around the county at weekends. I did not realise it at the time but morris dancing was a working class activity that was mocked by those from other classes; something I was about to experience. This estate was my community and to me it was safe.

Whilst I had good friends that I was pleased to be moving up to secondary school with, I was enjoying meeting new friends from more affluent areas of the town and getting invited to their houses. I fleetingly noticed some parents' reluctance to engage with me beyond saying something like "Oh, is this the one from the estate? Where are your other friends today?" At the time I assumed that it was because they knew the others and not me but it transpired that some friends were told that they would not be taken seriously in life by those who mattered if they were seen with someone like me. I felt confused and scared; trying to understand what I had done wrong, why I was such an unwelcome person. I was a decent student, doing well in all my subjects, I thought I had been polite. I could not find a reason for their attitude towards me until it was explained that it was because I was from the estate. Prior to this moment I was aware that some people did not like the area I lived in, but it never occurred to me that I would be rejected by people because of this. I felt small, detached, I wanted to run home. I was feeling a strong sense of shame. I felt unwelcome for who I was.

The echoes of rejection and unbelonging that I felt at 12 years old, have been present several times in MBP's and MTTP's, leaving me with the same feeling of wanting to retreat to a safe place, somewhere I know I will be welcome. Much of the time I am able to recognise the history of the feeling and stay alongside it, but there are times when it feels exhausting and never ending.

Finding my Voice Through Being with Feeling Dismissed

The more I researched the topic of diversity in MBP's and MTTP's, the more I was drawn to the themes of sexuality and social class due to my personal experience of both groups. During conversations at a mindfulness training weekend exploring potential thesis topics, although I felt some interest from others on the topic, I also sensed some dismissiveness. There seemed to be a general feeling from others that in

day to day life we do not talk about sexuality so why would we have those conversations in mindfulness classes? I began to feel detached, othered; I lost my place in the group, I felt alone. I wanted to cry and was uncomfortably aware of the heat in my face and the tingling around my heart that accompanied the beginning of tears. Due to my own therapy from times of trauma I recognized that a trauma response had been triggered within me and I was hurtling towards the outer reaches of my window of tolerance (Siegel, 2010). I knew that I needed to remain connected to others somehow. I found that sitting away from others but looking around the space helped me to maintain a connection. I kept contact with the feel of my feet in connection with the ground, reminding myself of the ever present stability the ground offers, and acknowledged the sadness and disconnect I was feeling. At the end of my short pause I asked myself "what does this moment need from me?". My chosen methodology of autoethnography was born in that moment.

I understood that the opinion of the others was not intended as a criticism towards me, rather it was due to our heteronormative society. They identified as the majority and expected "norm" of heterosexual so have no need to talk about their sexuality as it is already assumed. This makes it difficult for some to appreciate why those of us who identify as anything other than heterosexual need to talk about our sexuality. Whilst I knew this on a cognitive level, emotionally and somatically I was feeling hurt, othered, and distanced from the group.

Being Silenced Through the Lens of Heteronormativity

Expectations from Colleagues as a Mental Health Professional

I have experienced the sting of heteronormativity often in my life. I have been silenced by others and kept myself silent due to its heavy presence in society. As a mental health nurse, I have worked in various areas and have been told several times that I must not ever disclose to clients that I am gay. I have been told repeatedly that I would be disclosing parts of me that should be kept away from clients and that if I revealed my sexuality I would be blurring a professional boundary. At the same time, I would hear colleagues talking to clients about their own family including husbands/wives of the opposite sex.

I have been in situations when clients have said that they had heard I was gay and asked me directly and colleagues have quickly jumped into the conversation and denied my sexuality. This, I found especially difficult. It made me feel trapped with nowhere to go. I had the choice to either stay quiet and deny a part of me or to speak up and alienate myself from colleagues and potentially be told that I had broken a professional boundary. In the early days of my career I would always choose silence and denial. Whilst I understand the protective nature of that decision at the time, writing that now brings a sense of shame, sadness, and some anger that I felt I had to do that. Shame that I was not able to speak up for myself and others like me. It felt a heavy burden that to protect others I had to hide and deny a part of me; this part of me that felt so natural to me but seen by others as harmful to my client's wellbeing if they knew because by allowing that part of me to be seen by clients would be crossing a professional boundary.

My conversations with others who identify as LGBT and work in helping professions tell me that I am not alone in this experience. When others have openly

discussed their sexuality with clients it has led in some cases to colleagues making complaints and managers warning the person of their supposedly inappropriate behaviour, despite there being no complaints from clients. In the main I have become more confident in my sexuality and my career, although there are still times when I am unable to override the damaging message I was given by others about keeping that part of me silent. I have spoken with people in management roles about the attitude that staff should not reveal their sexuality, or more pointedly, their gayness to clients. Every time I have been told it is for protection of the staff member. Again, disappointingly, suggesting (to me) a belief that some harm would come to the member of staff (to me) if it became known to clients that the staff member (I), was gay.

Silencing Myself Due to Being Silenced by Others Reveals Itself in MBP's and MTTP's

The depth that the message to silence my sexuality had seeped into my psyche was evident during introductory meetings for a MBCT group I was going to be running. A participant came into the meeting and informed me early on in the discussion that they were gay. I felt pleased that they had shared the information and desperately wanted them to know that I identified as gay too, so they did not feel alone. However, I did not disclose my sexuality as I could not move beyond the fear that I would be reprimanded for doing so. I was left feeling sad and angry that I felt unable to bring this part of me to the discussion, blocked from showing them a sense of solidarity in that way. All through the eight week course I noted a sense of nervousness that I was able in my reflections to link directly to feeling unable to reveal that part of me to the group. It made me feel on edge a lot of the time, hyper aware of what I was not saying.

I also noticed my own bias in favour of this particular group member. During group enquiries, when this group member spoke of their experiences of the mindfulness

practices and linked them to their lifestyle I felt more drawn to their story than to other group members, an urge to ask more as I "knew" their story. What they were discussing was familiar to me. We are taught in mindfulness teacher training to welcome all our group members experience of their mindfulness practice, to remain open to it all, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This, however, was something I was not prepared for. Feeling more welcoming towards someone in the group due to recognising them as "like me". I remained mindful throughout the eight weeks not to act on my bias and the urge I felt to favour them and their familiar feeling story over other group members. I also acknowledged that the experience helped me to be mindful that there may have been others in the group who had chosen to remain silent about their sexuality in the same way I had.

The Danger in Revealing LGBT Identity

Dangers in Society when Difference is Shown

There are many examples in the media relating to safety and LGBT identification. A story hit the headlines in 2019 about two lesbian women who had been humiliated and beaten on a London bus by a group of teenage lads for expressing their love for each other by a simple act of holding hands in public. An act that my straight friends tell me they pay no attention to, they just do it. I am acutely aware that any and every time I have reached for my girlfriends' hand, or her mine, there has been a flash of a risk assessment first across my mind, "Where am I? Who is around? Is this safe here?" and for the first few seconds it feels uncomfortable. I feel exposed, vulnerable, as there is so much at stake if my assessment of safety is wrong as the two lesbian women on the London bus experienced. Some of the comments I read and heard at the time were as painful to experience as reading of the attack itself. Comments such as why did the two women have to be so obvious, and why could they not just keep it to

themselves, behind closed doors, leaving me with a feeling that some people believed the women had brought the attack on themselves. Whilst I heard these words as cruel and dismissive towards the assault on the women, I also felt them as a direct attack on me. As though by attacking them, I was feeling the wound.

I was told that it was doubtful I would ever experience anything like that as I "do not look gay". This is something I have heard and struggled with many times over the years in relation to my sexuality. I am feeling some shame as I realise that despite feeling some discomfort each time it has been said, I have never directly challenged anyone for saying it to me. When it has been said there is a sense that the person saying it believes they are complimenting me, that looking gay would be something to be avoided. For me, the discomfort I feel is due to a part of me being denied and highlighting gaps in my belonging. It makes me feel that I cannot not fully belong in the gay community because I do not look a certain way and neither do I belong in the straight community. Not knowing where I belong feels unsafe, dangerous.

Are others a danger to me or am I a danger to others?

During my mindfulness teacher training, I have attended several silent retreats. Arriving at one retreat, we were randomly put into twin rooms with another participant. I became concerned that if the other female in my room discovered I was gay; they would feel uncomfortable and potentially view me as the stereotype predatory lesbian. I had internalised the message from history and society that I was a danger to others simply because of my sexuality.

Throughout the week, I ensured that there was never a time, apart from sleeping, that we were in the room together. I set my alarm to get up super early before the other retreatant was awake and ensured that they were in bed at the end of the night before I returned to the room. There were times during the retreat that I may have wanted to go

back to the room to lie down but would not if they were in there. This was for no other reason than my belief that they would feel uncomfortable with me being in there with them because I am gay. Whatever my body was telling me it needed at the time during the retreat, would be overridden by this sense I had that the other person needed protecting from me, or that their comfort came before mine. I had internalised the assumption that I was less than the other person due to being gay. Once again, I found myself feeling alone, disconnected from the others on retreat, questioning if it was ok for me to be there. I tried offering some compassion to this vulnerability within me, this part that was feeling I was dangerous because of my sexuality. Ultimately though, I told myself that the distance I felt from the other retreatants was due to the silence. It was too painful for me to sit with the thought that I may be viewed by others as dangerous.

Showing Difference in Mindfulness Spaces

Do I Fit?

In many mindfulness spaces I regularly hear phrases during meditation practices inviting us to accept all our experiences, telling us to welcome all parts of ourselves without judgement. Although I hear these words and I feel the genuine sentiment from the teachers I am also aware that as I look around mindfulness spaces, in general I do not see or hear others like me, working class and/or gay. This leaves me wondering; can I belong, or do I need to change or silence parts of me to, at best, fit in? And if so, how can I truly accept all of my experience without judgement if there is a part of me that cannot be seen there?

When I began my journey with mindfulness teacher training in 2017 I was desperate to belong in the space. My practice had become central to who I was, helping me to become more comfortable with me, and accepting the parts of my personality and experience that I may have previously denied. Yet despite this, as I looked around on

the first day of my mindfulness training, I was met with the tell-tale signs (to me) of financial privilege; certain clothing, bags, shoes, accents, expensive looking haircuts, and expensive smelling perfume. A more upright, commanding stance and posture that a person naturally has when they are used to being in powerful positions that financial and class privilege affords them. A healthier glow to the skin that people from a working class background tend to have less often as we are more likely to work inside for longer hours. I am aware as I write this paragraph that it is laden with my own internalised prejudice and bias of signs of middle class and financial privilege. I also quickly scanned the room for any overt signs that anyone else was gay, or that my gayness was welcome. From the more obvious rainbow symbol, to a particular haircut and style of clothing. Again, I am painfully aware and slightly embarrassed of my own stereotyping and internalised heteronormativity.

Feeling Unseen in the Casual Moments Within MBP's and MTTP's. Can it ever be "just" Small Talk?

As I sat in the room at the beginning of my mindfulness teaching journey, I began to dread the small talk that would happen and the "get to know you" questions outside of the teaching sessions. There was a sense of "oh let's just get it over with and say I'm gay as soon as possible" as well as, "I'll just avoid the relationship question if asked". Of course, I was asked about family, as we do when we are getting to know people in a group and I felt my familiar signs of anxiety in these situations rise; shallow breath, tension around my eyes and jaw, tightness in my chest, burning through my body that begins in my stomach. My rapid judgement of if it is safe to say.

Historically when I have revealed my sexuality the response from others has been to either ignore it completely or has led to a list of deeply personal questions, the likes of which I have never heard being asked of straight people; "Oh right, how do you

have sex?", "Is one of you more like the man than the other?", "Are your family ok with that?", "What about children? Aren't you worried they will be bullied?". The last question I find especially difficult. There is a hint in that question that I would perhaps be less of a mother simply because of the gender of the person I love. The other questions hurt because they miss the love and intimacy of my relationship, reducing it to a sexual act. With this kind of history, it is not surprising I was worried about revealing my sexuality as I stepped into the mindfulness community.

I did say when I was asked during those "get to know you" sessions. My heart sank as the information was met with the response I have faced many times; ignored and moved on. Yet when another person was asked about their relationship there were then questions about the partner of the opposite sex, their job, length of relationship, children. Whilst this response, from my experience, is certainly not unusual, I did not want it here. I had hoped for something else, but here it was, and I felt a deeper sadness for it being here than I have in other situations as I longed to truly belong here. My relationship, my sexuality, me, ignored or treated as "less than". I had received the silent message once again, that this part of me was not welcome here. The feeling I had when I looked around the room as I arrived of "not fitting in" was confirmed. It was uncomfortable, and I could feel myself starting to move away and distance myself from the group.

Anything Other than Heterosexual is Unseen or Ignored in Society

Despite the strength of my personal practice which allows me to be with many painful experiences that I meet, the feeling I had that I did not belong in the teacher training space, that I was different, was heavy and overwhelming. The ignoring of me, my sexuality, whilst occurring in that present moment, could not be felt by me as a

single one off event. It was magnified beyond that moment due to it sitting on top of so many moments of being ignored and unseen as a gay woman.

Like when my girlfriend and I have been out for an evening meal and when it comes to paying at the end of the night we are asked if we want to split the bill as the assumption is we are friends; our true status ignored, unseen. Or when we have checked into a hotel and been told “I am sorry, but we have no twin rooms left”. Or getting a taxi for a night out and the driver says, “left the fella’s at home tonight have you girls?”. Every time needing to make a rapid assessment of our safety. The decision to remain silent or reveal our true status. Worrying that if I do say something the other person may feel embarrassed or a sense of shame for their assumption.

Contrasting this when I am out with my straight male friends, we are regularly treated by strangers as a couple. For my friends there is never any worry about their safety. My interpretation of conversations I have had with them on this subject is that they feel some anger on my behalf at what feels like an attack on me, some defensiveness of our relationship for the friendship it is, but never any fear for their safety if they speak the truth or any sense that they are unseen or being silenced. The experiences have no impact on their sense of self. For me, I am left feeling uneasy, the ever present decision to speak my truth or remain silent and deny myself. Contrary to popular stereotype beliefs, there is no one “coming out” event. The decision to come out or stay in is relentless, always there in the background.

The Shame of the Financial Divide Between me and Others in Mindfulness Spaces

My Financially Poor History is with me in the Present

Financing my place within the mindfulness community whilst coming from a low SEB has not come easy. In the early days of my journey during my first eight week MBSR course, something as simple as choosing what to take for my lunch during the

all-day retreat came with much soul searching. At that time, whenever I went anywhere that required me to take a packed lunch, my auto response would be to buy a prepacked sandwich or pasta dish on the way “for convenience”. Having the time, silence, and space to reflect on this during that all day retreat revealed a truth that I feel much lighter for being able to explore.

I chose on that day to sit at the communal table to eat my lunch, curious about how it would feel to eat in the company of others in silence. Whilst I tried to be mindful of my own food and the experience of it, I of course glanced around at the others, checking out what they were eating. I became aware very quickly that every other person had brought lunch that they had made themselves; in smart, expensive looking lunch boxes. I looked down at my bought, prepacked lunch and immediately felt a sense of shame and that others were judging me for my lunch. In that moment, the others in the room disappeared, I felt hot, my face was tingling, and there was a tightness in my stomach. I felt the rumblings of dissociation. My mind went back to lunch times in secondary school and the judgements placed on my lunch. If I took a packed lunch made at home it would be sparce. Other children had fresh fruit and little boxes of raisins with their exotic looking sandwiches, not a plain ham sandwich and a taxi bar. Even now when I see those little boxes of raisins I assume the person is from a more affluent background than me. Due to being from a low SEB I was entitled to free school meals. I had to identify myself at the till as being on free meals so was leaving myself vulnerable for further ridicule. At that time being on free school meals was something for others to laugh at. Whichever I chose, packed lunch or free meal, I was going to be mocked.

Echoes of those historic feelings of judgement and shame were alive and present with me during that first all day mindfulness retreat eight years ago. It led me to feel

distant from the group, an outsider. I reflected on the experience in my journal at the time, which allowed me to recognise the connection with my past, the re-igniting of old wounds. Nowadays, whenever a training or mindfulness day calls for me to take my lunch, I am able to notice my automatic reaction that wants to "just pick something up on the way" rather than take what I want to eat in a bid to avoid those feelings from my school days. I am able to offer myself a brief pause and a soft comforting smile of knowing before moving on to make an authentic decision about lunch. Noticing that I was different to the others, spending time in silence, and reflecting on it, had allowed me to understand what was behind my automatic behaviour.

The Temptation to put Myself in Financial Difficulty to fit in Mindfulness Spaces

The privileged position people are in for having higher amounts of disposable income, was made clear during a mindfulness training day. The trainer mentioned that they had left mindfulness books on a table at the back that we were welcome to take for a suggested donation of five pounds. In the break I went to look at the books. There were many to choose from, several copies of each and numerous titles that I had in my wish list. I sat back down, checked my money, and realised I could only afford one book so set about in my mind choosing the one that would be most beneficial and cost effective. Once I had decided I went back to the table to discover only three or four books were left. The one I had decided on was gone but the others were great books, so I picked one. As I moved to the donation pot I was physically taken back by the amount of money. Mostly twenty and ten pound notes, the pot was overflowing. I turned to walk back to my seat and noticed some people with stacks of maybe ten books. I felt angry at what I framed as selfishness, also resentment that I could not afford more. I also wonder if there was a sense of embarrassment or a need to fit in or simply a want for another book because something in that moment led me to turn around and buy

another book that I absolutely could not afford. I reflected on this in my journal at the time and why I did not just leave a five pound donation for both books. There is something about that saying "suggested donation of……" that sits with me as that is the expected price and anything less is unacceptable.

It is not as Simple as Offering Bursaries and Grants

As I step into my role of mindfulness teacher, I am concerned that I will not be able to keep up with the expectations of mindfulness teachers from a financial perspective. One of my concerns is the expectation for mindfulness teachers to attend a silent retreat, of at least five days duration which needs to fit certain criteria, once a year. I have gained so much both personally and professionally from the retreats I have been on during my teacher training that I totally understand and agree with this as a teacher requirement. From a financial position, I know this is going to be an almost impossible commitment for me to adhere to each year.

I often see retreats being advertised with a discounted rate for those that can pay immediately in one payment. On the rare occasion that I have seen retreats offered with the option to pay by instalments, there has been an extra fee charged for this. Hence those with more disposable income and able to pay straight away are rewarded with a reduced fee, whilst those with less money and their only option to pay in instalments, are penalised by having to pay more for the retreat. It puzzles me why those who are more affluent are offered a reduced fee, and those who struggle financially are asked to pay more.

Whilst there are various bursaries and grant schemes to access within the mindfulness community, I have personally found accessing these a challenge. When it was first suggested to me that I make enquiries to access funding I felt unsettled, vulnerable, a familiar sense of shame. A feeling that asking for funding was revealing

something of myself that was best kept hidden. A deep rooted shame of asking for money. There was an expectation during the application processes that I explain why I should have the funding above others, to explain what it was about me and my application that stands out from others. I interpreted this as “what made me believe I was more deserving than anyone else applying”. For me, the process was unsettling; left me feeling like I was in battle with other people like me. I in no way wanted to take anything from anyone else who was in my position, nor did I feel more deserving of funding than anyone else who was applying, yet I was left feeling that this is exactly what I was doing. I felt extremely small, a sense that there was someone with power over me. I am grateful that my practice allows me to sit with these difficult experiences and recognise their history and strength. I almost walked away from the process several times but reminded myself of why I was applying, what it was going to help me achieve. Ultimately my long term goal of being able to share mindfulness with people who are marginalised.

I came away from the process wondering if people from more affluent backgrounds could ever understand how I feel having to ask for money with the knowledge that there is no plan B if I am rejected. There is an image in my mind of Oliver from the Charles Dickens novel asking for more porridge. The fear and bravery of stepping up and asking, knowing the consequences could be humiliating and devastating. I cannot help but wonder as each financial hurdle builds on the last, whether I am forcing myself into an area that I was never meant to be.

Mindfulness Spaces for the LGBT Community

A Place Where I can Bring my Full Self

When I discovered that there were places offering mindfulness meditation days for the LGBT community I could hardly contain my excitement! I was desperate to

attend. I felt a wealth of emotions as I read the title; teary, happiness, excitement at finding something that I had not realised I was looking for. I tentatively checked the cost and was relieved to find that it was genuinely affordable. The difference I felt in the space from other mindfulness spaces was palpable from the moment I walked through the door. My passion and belief in what mindfulness brings to my life and the lives of others, keeps me in general population mindfulness spaces despite encountering difficulties that others may not; but here, those specific difficulties were gone. I had no need to look around wondering if there were any other gay people, no need to guess and try to assess if that part of me was welcome or safe to be seen here. I could let it all go. The first line I wrote in my journal about arriving at that space on the day was "I instantly feel at home".

The feeling reminded me of how I feel entering a gay bar. Looking around and seeing others like me, my sexuality in the majority. No need to consider if I am safe to hold my girlfriends' hand. I notice a difference in my walk as I enter; my head is held a little higher, and I walk a little taller with more confidence. I am not used to walking in this way, so I feel it as a bit of a swagger! I imagine that the difference is barely noticeable to others, but I feel it, I know it. I was not aware until I went into a gay bar for the first time, the extent of scanning that I do and the unseen hurdles that are present in non-gay settings, until I first felt the welcome absence of them. The scanning and checking had become an automatic response in me.

We were invited during the introduction session of the LGBT mindfulness day to pair up with someone and if it felt ok, to share the pronouns we use and how we identify our sexuality. It felt refreshing and validating to be invited to name it and discuss it; I believed I had a genuine choice to name it or not rather than that choice be hidden under layer upon layer of fear, expectations, and assumptions.

During the guided and unguided meditations, I felt more able to let go of the chatter in my mind, I was less likely to judge the experience and more able to accept it and be with it. This was especially evident in parts of the day when choices were to be made, such as choosing to walk inside or outside, where to eat my lunch, choosing time for personal practice or attending the small group talks. I felt more able to stay close to what I needed in each moment, rather than wondering what was expected of me from the others in the room. When these types of thoughts arrived, I was more likely to notice them as thoughts and come back rather than be swept along with their emotional content.

During a period of unguided walking meditation, I felt fully immersed in the experience. Choosing where I wanted to walk, guided by my own body as to how I wanted to walk, speed, length of stride, when I wanted to stop. If I looked around at other participants I simply felt curious about what they were doing, then came back to my own experience. There was a welcome absence of worry that others were judging my every step. It was the most powerful walking meditation I had ever experienced. In my journal at the time I wrote that I had experienced what I framed as true embodiment. A quality that is notoriously difficult to describe but said to be a vital component for mindfulness teachers in modelling the practice for students and clients (Woods et.al., 2019). I became aware that as I grew more accepting of myself, I also felt a deeper connection to the others in the group than I have in other mindfulness spaces. The ability to truly accept and belong to myself had led to a deeper belonging with others. Someone else described their experience of the day beautifully when they said, “I didn’t realise it until today, but I have been leaving part of me at the doorway in meditation spaces for over 30 years. Today I brought my full self.”.

I experienced so much joy during the day, yet it came with some sadness. Being in a mindfulness class, specifically for the LGBT community, knowing that I belonged, made me realise what I was missing out on in general mindfulness spaces. I had been able to get to a place of self-acceptance simply because I had felt fully accepted by others in the group. The experience had a profound effect on my practice and on my teaching. The acceptance of who I am that I found within the space, is more likely to be with me now in other mindfulness spaces too. Whilst the realisation that some people will always reject me simply because of my sexuality inevitably stings; my acceptance of me also allows me to be more accepting of others who may have a different lifestyle or experience of the world than me. I am more able in my teaching to notice if others are struggling with any aspect of "difference" and model acceptance within the group. It highlighted for me the reciprocal nature of mindfulness groups; feeling accepted within the group, allowed me to accept myself, leading me to feel accepting of others, and on it goes; the ripples of acceptance and welcome continue to expand.

The Power of Seeing Someone "like me" in Mindfulness Spaces

I recognised that being led by a mindfulness meditation teacher who was open about her sexuality was deeply inspiring for me. Not only was she in the space but she held a position of leadership, allowing me to believe that it was possible for me too. Knowing there is someone "like me" in that position, gives me increasing confidence as I step into my role of teacher. As well as wanting to be there in the role of teacher, I now know that I am allowed to be there.

I am aware that I now feel more of a pull to general population mindfulness classes and groups when I know the facilitator is gay; I feel no need to question if I am welcome and I feel an increased level of support from the teacher, an overall sense of ease that I can otherwise struggle to feel. Discussions with other mindfulness teachers

who are openly gay, have revealed that whilst there is no hard evidence for this, they have a real sense that in their general population groups, a higher percentage of people who identify as belonging to the LGBT community attend their groups than in spaces where the facilitator is straight.

The Unexpected Twist that 2020 Dealt us all

When I began writing this thesis in October 2019, no one could have imagined how different the world was going to be by March 2020. The impact of Covid-19 and the consequences on the lives of everyone are complex and far reaching. For the mindfulness community, the impact was immediate and called for new ways of thinking about the delivery of groups. We were no longer able to meet in person and there were to be no gatherings of groups of people. All face to face MBP's ceased immediately. In response to the crisis, an overwhelming number of offerings from the mindfulness community popped up online. I could not keep up with the number of emails I was receiving on a daily basis informing me of groups, talks, recordings, and meetings that were available online. My response was to avoid them all. On the one hand it felt like my familiar crisis response of shutting down and avoiding. But I also wonder if the whole mindfulness community had collectively stepped into Doing Mode (Segal et al., 2013) in response to the crisis, and something within me due to my regular practice was telling me I needed to let this experience be for a while. I also froze with my research. I could not settle to write for any significant amount of time. I once again, began to wonder if my topic, my story, mattered or needed this level of attention with everything that was happening in the world.

As someone living with a chronic autoimmune disease taking immunosuppressant medication, I was identified as being at severe risk from the virus and received a shielding letter from the government. I was told I needed to physically

isolate from the world to be kept safe. As an NHS staff member this came with a unique set of difficulties. I continued to work from home during the crisis, supporting clients with wellbeing calls, which was difficult at times without the support of a team. Watching news reports, praising NHS staff on the frontline, I was left feeling less than my colleagues for working from home. It was difficult to speak up if I needed anything as the focus was on supporting staff working the frontline. At times I felt insignificant, silenced.

I felt resentful that the rainbow was chosen as the symbol of support for the NHS. The rainbow, a symbol synonymous around the world with the LGBT community. A symbol that, when I see it on advertisements for hotels, restaurants, companies, training courses, I feel safe; I know that I am being considered. And now it has been taken by the NHS. I feel spiteful for not wanting to share it as I am passionate about the NHS and my work within it, but that symbol means so much to me and the LGBT community, I wish deeply that something else was chosen. I worry that as the world opens up again, I will not be able to trust it as a sign that I am safe and welcome.

So here I was, at home, part of the marginalised shielded community, feeling like I did not have a voice, knowing I may not be safe in the world. Alongside, trying to write a thesis about being part of a marginalised community, being silenced if I speak my truth and at times not feeling safe in the world because of my difference. It took quite a while for these parallels to find their way into my awareness, but once they were there, the fear, the freeze began to soften in the gentlest way. It felt like a soothing arm around me saying, “of course it’s difficult, look at this!”, and with that, slowly and steadily, my personal formal mindfulness practice increased, my writing began again, as did my online connection with the mindfulness community. The first place I went was

online offerings of mindfulness for the LGBT community. It felt good to be back. To belong.

My experience of the pandemic raises my awareness of how seemingly unrelated incidences can reignite old wounds. For me, the feeling of isolation as a shielded member of society reminded me of the isolated feeling I have had as a working class and gay woman, in society and within MBP's and MTTP's. The deep awareness the pandemic has given me of my own vulnerabilities and challenges, helps me as I move back into the space of mindfulness teacher, to remain mindful of the unique challenges and differences of every person in attendance; and how vital it is to feel that sense of belonging to the group.

Discussion

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to gain an understanding of the everyday life of a working-class gay woman, and her experience of MBP's and MTTP's, through the lens of being part of these two groups. The motivation for the study was the growing realisation from those within the mindfulness community that there is a distinct lack of diversity in mindfulness groups and teacher training programmes as the majority of participants and students are white, middle class, heterosexual, women (Power, 2019).

The study shows that there are difficulties experienced by someone who is working class and identifies as gay within MBP's and MTTP's that may not be noticed by those who do not identify as belonging to these marginalised groups. The results support the assertion from Brandsma (2017), discussed in the introduction, that it is vital for group participants of MBP's and developing teachers within MTTP's to feel a sense of belonging to each other and the teacher, in order to feel safe enough to develop mindfulness practice and become more accepting of themselves and their experiences.

The findings of the study demonstrate that a heightened awareness of the researchers own differences and the difficulties she encounters within MBP's and MTTP's, leads to a deeper awareness as she teaches, of the differences and potential difficulties for other group members.

The benefit of a mindfulness group specific for the LGBT community was significant within this study. The researcher found that she felt a sense of belonging immediately as she had no need to wonder if the group contained others like her. The ability to let go of any worries that she was not safe to show her full self in the space, led to a deeper and fuller connection to her mindfulness practice during the day. The LGBT mindfulness day also revealed a significant finding of the importance of seeing an openly gay mindfulness teacher within the community, as this enabled the researcher to believe that this was possible for her too, so increasing her confidence and sense of belonging to the wider mindfulness community.

The results of the study uncover the difficulty the researcher has keeping up financially with her peers in the mindfulness community, leaving her wondering if she is forcing herself into a community that she does not or cannot belong.

The main themes from the study; belonging, heteronormative culture, and financial difficulties, will be discussed in more detail.

Belonging

The results indicate four main areas that impact on the researcher's sense of belonging: feeling safe, seeing others like her, the impact of feeling silenced, and the presence of overt signs of being welcome.

Feeling Safe

The results bring to the fore the relevance that personal history and social context has on a person's feeling of safety in the present moment, and the impact this

has on a sense of belonging. This is evidenced when the researcher described her experience of venturing outside her community as she moved into secondary school. She experienced a strong sense of safety and belonging in the estate she lived in yet was excited to be exploring new areas and meeting people who were different from her community. By being told she was "not welcome" in the more affluent areas of town, she felt unsafe and wanted to run back to the safety of "her own people" on the estate. This feeling sat alongside her as she stepped into the mindfulness teacher training space; being amongst people who were more affluent left her feeling unsafe as she was unsure if she were allowed and could belong.

The results also describe a story from the media when two lesbian women were public with their sexuality leading them to be brutally assaulted. Language she heard at the time of the attack left the researcher questioning if it is safe for her to reveal her sexuality when she enters unfamiliar spaces such as mindfulness groups or teacher training programmes.

Recognising Self in Others

The true value of belonging was only really revealed to the researcher when she attended a mindfulness day for the LGBT community, as it was within this space that she felt her full self was accepted by the group. Being with others "like her" gave her a strong sense of belonging. The experience highlighted for her the level of "unbelonging" she had in other mindfulness spaces as she was able to notice the absence of a host of difficulties during the LGBT group that are present for her in general mindfulness groups. This included not having to worry that her sexuality was welcome and if there were others like her in the space. Ultimately, the strong belonging to the LGBT group felt by the researcher, enabled her to experience acceptance and embodiment of mindfulness to a level she had not known before. She was then able to

transfer this to her teaching and general mindfulness groups and noticed that she was more accepting of others and her own experience within those spaces too.

The impact of safe spaces for people who identify as belonging to marginalised groups, sometimes called “affinity groups” is confirmed by McLaren (2009) who found that lesbian women who felt a sense of belonging and acceptance within lesbian affinity groups, reported feeling a higher sense of belonging to the general community and reduced symptoms of depression as a consequence.

The results also introduce the value of being with a teacher who was open about their sexuality. Seeing a teacher who identified as gay in a position of leadership, led to the researcher believing this was a possibility for her and strengthened her sense of belonging to the mindfulness community as a whole.

Impact of Silencing

The findings reveal several occasions when the researcher felt disconnected from the group due to being silenced or believing that she needed to silence herself. This was evidenced when she sensed from others that the topic of sexuality within the mindfulness community did not warrant a research study. Whilst this was a challenging moment for the researcher, her practice, and her ability to stay with the difficulty became the decision point for her chosen methodology. Sitting with difficulty is a core skill taught in MBP’s and allows a clear seeing of experience, allowing for wise choices to be made (Segal et al., 2013).

There was a moment during her mindfulness teaching when the researcher felt unable to disclose her sexuality to the group, despite her urge to connect with a group member who had been open about their sexuality. There was a fear for the researcher that she would be reprimanded if she spoke of her sexuality in the mindfulness group, due to messages she had received from colleagues as a mental health nurse. Whilst this

left the researcher feeling ”on edge” a lot of the time in the group, it also enabled her to be mindful that there may be others in the group who were silencing themselves in the same way as her.

Overt Signs of Welcoming

The findings reveal moments of overt signs that the researcher was welcome for her difference, led her to believe that she could belong in the mindfulness community. This was evidenced when the researcher read blogs from those with privilege within the mindfulness community, stating that people within the mindfulness community who identified as being from marginalised groups were needed for the lack of diversity within the field to be addressed (Crane, 2018; Evans, 2018). This resulted in the researcher believing she was genuinely wanted for her difference in the field, thus strengthening her belonging.

The researcher noted that she had looked around the room when she entered her mindfulness teacher training programme for visible signs that she was welcome, such as the rainbow symbol which is synonymous around the world with the LGBT community. The researcher described how in other areas of her life, seeing this symbol lets her know that she is welcome, that she is being considered, although she is also concerned that during the coronavirus crisis, the rainbow has become a sign of support for the NHS leading her to worry if she can trust it as a sign of welcome for the LGBT community in the future. The value of visible signs of belonging is supported by Power (2018) who asserts that we rely on visual clues in order to “sort out people who are like us from those who aren’t.” (Power, 2018).

Heteronormative Culture

The study found that heteronormative assumptions permeate all parts of society, including within MBP's and MTTP's and reveal that the researcher is not immune to this just because she identifies as gay. Her worries that she would be viewed as a "predatory lesbian" or her inability to reveal her sexuality to group members during her teaching confirm her internalised assumptions due to our heteronormative culture. Internalised homophobia due to a heteronormative culture is common amongst people who identify as LGBT and presents as directing negative social attitudes regarding LGBT identification towards oneself, which leads a person to devalue themselves (Meyer & Dean, 1998). This would appear to be the case for the researcher when she felt unable to return to her room on retreat to take care of herself by lying down if her fellow retreatant was there.

Heteronormativity also seemed to be at play during casual moments in her mindfulness training when the researcher revealed that she was gay, and the conversation ended there, whilst others in the group who were heterosexual were asked further questions about their relationships. Or, as discussed previously, when the researcher felt others in the field did not feel a study including the topic of sexuality was needed. For some people there is a belief that equality means not talking about differences in sexuality and subscribe to the belief that "we are all the same". However, this attitude is similar to colour blindness in the fight for racial equality. Colour blindness is the belief that the way to overcome racism is to ignore colour and race and never mention it (Magee, 2016). It is becoming more widely acknowledged now that it is impossible not to notice differences and as noted by the researcher in this study, the refusal of others to acknowledge and talk about differences, leaves her feeling isolated.

Financial Difficulties

The findings of the study reveal specific financial difficulties for someone from a working class background within the mindfulness community. One of the areas this was expressed within the study was the researcher being unable to afford the same number of books as her peers and how easily accessible it seemed for others in the group to buy large amounts of books. Despite the cheap cost and the suggestion of a donation, the researcher was still at a disadvantage in comparison to her peers.

The results of this study clearly illustrate the difficulty the researcher had in accessing bursaries and grants within the mindfulness community due to the language used in the documentation. The researcher described how she was left feeling small, "as though there was someone with power over me". This finding is supported by Eddo-Lodge (2018) who asserts that the belief that those with inherent privilege should use it to help others can bring with it a sense of power over those who are disadvantaged.

Whilst some of the financial struggles the researcher has within the mindfulness community, lead her to wonder if she is forcing her way into a community she was never meant to be, there are times when noticing her difference led to a positive outcome. One such time was during the all day silent retreat when the researcher became aware of the difference in her lunch to other group members and she was taken back to the difficulties around lunch from her school days. The experience enabled the researcher to recognise how she regularly acts "out of awareness" or "on automatic pilot" when she chooses lunch due to difficulties from her past. Becoming more aware of our moment to moment experience to enable us to live our lives less on automatic pilot is one of the fundamental skills in MBP's (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This example also shows that by staying with a difficulty, allowing it some space, new ways of knowing it are revealed (Segal et al., 2013).

Unexpected Finding

A surprising result was the strength of awareness of my own internal unconscious bias. I had expected when I set out on this journey that I would become aware of times when unconscious bias was beneath the behaviour of others within the mindfulness community leading to people of difference being disadvantaged. I did not expect to be so aware of my own unconscious bias, such as my bias in favour of someone in my group who identified as gay, or my prejudices seeing what I interpreted as signs of affluence and middle class. However, these results are consistent with a study by Burgess et al. (2017) who found that once unconscious bias has been activated, those who have a regular mindfulness practice have an increased ability to notice it and are then less likely to act on it.

Strengths

The researcher is not aware of any existing studies that use the methodology of autoethnography to explore diversity of class and sexuality within MBP's and MTTP's. As such, this study forges new ground in the quest to understand the lack of diversity in mindfulness spaces. The researchers' choice of methodology gives access to information, and an understanding of the cultural group being studied, that other methods may not have uncovered.

Limitations

Undoubtedly this study has all the limitations inherent in an autoethnography, including an extremely limited participant sample as the researcher is the only study participant. Whilst the researcher aimed to include as wide a variety of data as possible, the choice to include or not was at her own discretion. The study is from an entirely subjective viewpoint although the researcher does make this clear from the outset.

There is potential for the coronavirus crisis to have been a limitation for this study as it limited access to a number of mindfulness groups and retreats the researcher had planned to attend during the writing of her thesis. As such the researcher was unable to document her experience of being part of the full range of groups she had planned whilst simultaneously writing her autoethnography. However, as noted in the results, the researcher found that her experience of the crisis, led to an increased awareness of her own differences and how these related to her difficulties within MBP's and MTTP's. The experience enabled the researcher to be mindful of the differences and difficulties of others who attend mindfulness spaces.

Implications and recommendations

Results of the study indicate practical and clinical implications for the mindfulness field. The results show the importance of using language that does not exclude people in written documentation, such as when trying to access bursaries and grants within the mindfulness community. The researcher would recommend that policy makers and document writers are mindful of using exclusionary language, and would recommend that people from diverse backgrounds are included when policies and documents are being discussed and written in order to help uncover blind spots that may go unnoticed by anyone who does not identify as belonging to a marginalised group.

The presence of visible signs that diversity is welcome is an important implication for the mindfulness community. In this study, the presence of the rainbow symbol for the LGBT community is of significance as it lets the researcher know she is being considered. The researcher suggests the possibility of including the rainbow symbol on websites, notices, and other documentation, indicating a "LGBT friendly" space. Although not mentioned in the results of this study, it is possible for workplaces to be acknowledged by Stonewall, the charity that supports the LGBT community, as a

"LGBT-Inclusive Workplace" once certain criteria has been met. The researcher would recommend that this is explored within the mindfulness community.

The study illustrates the benefit of being invited to name identified sexuality and pronouns used during an LGBT mindfulness group. It may begin to break down barriers and address assumptions if this was extended into general mindfulness spaces, allowing those who identify as heterosexual to feel how it is to have to name their sexuality rather than have it assumed. This could be modelled by facilitators when they introduce themselves to the group. It may also be an opportunity for practitioners to become aware of their own implicit bias.

As previously acknowledged, mindfulness practice increases open and curious awareness of the full range of our moment to moment experiences, including sensations, thought patterns, and habits. As such, Burgess et al. (2017) found that people who practice mindfulness regularly have an increased ability to notice and acknowledge implicit bias leading to a reduced possibility of acting on them. To enable teachers and group participants to work with their implicit bias, the researcher suggests the topic of implicit bias could be introduced when discussing judgements, or mindfulness of communication, or perhaps during week six of MBCT when the theme is "Thoughts are not Facts" (Segal et al., 2013). This is also supported by Power (2018) who asserts that we can only change our patterns and judgements by bringing them into our consciousness and making wise choices about how to respond to them in each moment.

Being in a mindfulness group facilitated by an openly gay mindfulness teacher, increased the researcher's sense of belonging, allowed her practice to deepen, and ultimately to feel an increased connection to the wider mindfulness community. This may also be the case for other marginalised groups if there is a strong, visible presence of people from diverse backgrounds, especially in positions of leadership, such as group

facilitators. In order to begin to address the lack of diversity in MBP's and MTTP's, the recommendation is to notice and give space to the voices of those from marginalised communities who are in mindfulness spaces whenever possible.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are a number of recommendations for future research following on from this study. Staying with the theme from this study of exploring the experience within MBP's and MTTP's of those who identify as belonging to marginalised communities, the researcher recommends carrying out a study with a wider sample of participants in order to compare and contrast the results from this study, leading to a fuller understanding of the experience of those from diverse backgrounds within the mindfulness community.

This study highlights the value of LGBT specific mindfulness spaces; therefore, the researcher recommends extending research into this area e.g., MBSR or MBCT groups for the LGBT community or other diverse populations. Given the findings discussed by Chin et al. (2019) that mindfulness is beneficial to the health and well-being of those from diverse populations but the attrition rate is high, the researcher recommends that alongside exploring the experience within the groups, future studies should explore the health and well-being impact on individuals, and attendance levels in identity specific groups.

Future recommendations for research would also include the experience of teachers of MBP's who are from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps in the form of a comparison study between the experience of teaching general population groups and identity specific groups, possibly with a focus on levels of connection to the group, and the impact this has on mindfulness practice and teaching.

To Sum Up

The researcher has found that there are unseen difficulties and hurdles that need navigating as a working-class gay woman within MBP's and MTTP's before mindfulness can begin to be beneficial to well-being. The study reveals the high value of establishing a sense of belonging to the group and that for the researcher, this was found during a mindfulness group for the LGBT community. Practicing alongside others "like her" and with a facilitator who was open with her sexuality, enabled a letting-go of a whole host of difficulties she is presented with in general mindfulness spaces. This led to a deepening of her practice, an understanding of embodiment that she had not experienced before, and ultimately a deeper awareness in her teaching of individual difficulties that group members may be experiencing.

As stated in the introduction, it is hoped that this study brings a deep understanding of the experience of those from diverse backgrounds within MBP's and MTTP's so that the lack of diversity within mindfulness spaces can be addressed. The study supports the assertion by Brandsma (2017) that a sense of belonging to the group is essential in order to begin to benefit from mindfulness.

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