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# Student counsellors' experiences of mindfulness as a component of their person-centred counselling training: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

**Aim:** Mindfulness is increasingly integrated into counselling and psychotherapy practices, as well as being introduced to students in academic institutes with the aim of supporting them to balance the responsibilities of academic study, placements and other commitments alongside university life. Despite mindfulness routinely finding its way into counselling settings and being incorporated into counsellor training, there has yet to be any research conducted to explore the experience of student counsellors who have received mindfulness as a part of their undergraduate person-centred training. This study explored the reflections of counsellors who had attended a mindfulness module during the first year of a counselling degree.

**Design:** Six students completing a university-based undergraduate degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy in the North-West of England, in the UK, participated in the research. The study consisted of two students from each of the three years of the programme. Participants individually attended a semi-structured interview to explore their experiences of mindfulness as a mandatory module of their training in person-centred counselling. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the generated data.

**Findings:** Four superordinate themes were generated: 1) becoming a counsellor, 2) person-centred mindfulness, 3) time, and 4) learning and development.

**Discussion:** Experiential themes were explored including the process of professionalism, vulnerability, embodiment of person-centred theory and the core conditions and the conflict of approach.

**Conclusion:** Recommendations are made for mindfulness to be included in counselling training programmes with a person-centred focus. Suggestions for further research include longitudinal studies to follow the development of trainees over time.

Research question: This study aimed to answer the research question: "How do student counsellors experience mindfulness as a component of their person-centred counselling training?"

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**KEYWORDS**

counselling, interpretative phenomenological analysis, mindfulness, person-centred, student counsellor, trainee counsellor, training

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, mindfulness has risen in popularity, been integrated into conventional counselling and psychotherapy practice, and has been proliferated into the profession as a method of self-care to manage the psychological demands of the profession. Balancing the commitments of training, student counsellors are likely to be at greater risk of stress and burnout due to the management of placements and academic requirements, so mindfulness has been suggested as a support to help students maintain their emotional equilibrium and well-being (Shapiro et al., 2000, 2007). The University of Salford introduces its undergraduate counselling students to mindfulness by placing it into the curriculum of the mindfulness and well-being module (level 4) in the second semester of the first year of the degree programme. The module lead is a senior lecturer in Counselling and Psychotherapy and an accredited mindfulness teacher who specialises in trauma-sensitive mindfulness and mindfulness teacher training. The module is designed to embed the domains of mindfulness-based interventions, teaching assessment criteria (MBI:TAC), and the aim and placement of the module is to support the overall well-being of the students and the development of their newly forming, person-centred counselling skills (Rogers, 1951, 1957). Prior to the commencement of this study, there had not been any research conducted to support the inclusion of mindfulness into the counselling and psychotherapy programme. Furthermore, the trainee counsellors' experience of mindfulness during their training was the focus of the study, rather than attempting to quantify the impact mindfulness had on person-centred counselling skills.

Between 2018 and 2019, 1.6 million referrals were made to talking therapies in England to support people living with anxiety and depression, a rise from 1.44 million reported in the previous year (NHS, 2019). As the demand for mental health support in the UK increases, so does the need for counsellors. Due to the close psychological proximity required for effective counselling, the risk of counsellors being psychologically impacted by the demands of the profession increases, leaving therapists to manage the potential negative impacts of the profession such as vicarious trauma, burnout and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2013; Joinson, 1992; Klimecki & Singer, 2012).

In person-centred therapy (PCT), the counsellor is trained to collaborate with their client to co-create an environment that cultivates the client's pre-existing capacity to heal themselves by supporting the 'necessary and sufficient conditions for personality change' (Rogers, 1957). The researcher also acknowledges a common thread between person-centred theory and the practice of mindfulness: to remain in the present moment with kindly awareness and hold what appears without judgement. In light of

### Implications for Practice and Policy

- The findings of this study support the view that mindfulness incorporated into training aids trainee counsellors' development as they become a professional and work to the integral values of the counselling profession.
- Given that the BACP mandatorily requires student counsellors to undertake personal and professional development groups, the research raises awareness and prompts further questions regarding what student counsellors are attributing their development to, such as mindfulness practice or mindful awareness, and what they do not feel has been significant.

supporting present moment experience, it has been suggested that, theoretically, the base of the person-centred model and mindfulness practice are similar, with both said to exist in the moment with awareness, kindness, and acceptance (Jooste et al., 2015). During their initial person-centred counselling training, at a different academic institute to the one included in this study, the researcher felt that their mindfulness practice supported their personal and professional development. Over time, mindfulness practice aided the embodiment of the Rogerian conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957), even during times of increased psychological turbulence during counselling training and client work.

Kabat-Zinn (1990) introduced his Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction programme (MBSR) into mainstream culture and began to integrate mindfulness into psychological therapies. Mindfulness has been compared to PCT because it demonstrates two ways of 'being': one, as a technique to be applied when required; and two, as a choice to be present within any given moment. Mindfulness was included in the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's guidelines (2004), which further supported its inclusion in counselling and psychotherapeutic services in the UK. Kabat-Zinn (2009b) acknowledges how mindfulness has become a mainstream construct in psychotherapy, referring to the progressive inclusion of mindfulness into counsellor training, alongside the typical reflective and practical counselling skills training. Increasingly, research has been conducted to support the benefits of mindfulness for the well-being and practice of counsellors. This research focused primarily on how mindfulness is perceived and experienced by student counsellors during their training and how the introduction of mindfulness influences their practice.

Unlike previous studies, this research solely includes undergraduate participants on a BSc counselling and psychotherapy

(professional practice) degree, studying from a person-centred therapeutic perspective at a university within the UK. The review of previous studies identified an absence of focused research exploring mindfulness inclusion in the training of undergraduate, person-centred counselling students. This study has contributed towards closing the current gap and laying the foundation for further research in this area.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 | Design

For this study, a qualitative approach was taken to enable the lived experience and personal resonance with each of the participants to reveal itself in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study, therefore, embraced a post-positivist perspective and a relativist ontology due to the underpinning belief that perspective is changeable (Denscombe, 2014). Due to the focus on individual experience, the study utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009) because of its ability to honour the idiographic lived experience of each participant. The study aimed to complete six to eight semi-structured interviews.

### 2.2 | Sampling

All participants were recruited from the same course at the same university, and the interviews were conducted by a lone researcher. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be extrapolated to wider contexts. A larger study would have been unmanageable for a novice researcher and would have been outside the realms of a year-long, unfunded dissertation. The recruitment aimed to gain diversity in its participants, allowing student counsellors of mixed age, sex, ethnic background, and year of study to volunteer for the research. Six volunteered, two from each of the three years of the course, without intervention from the researcher—this was not a selected sample; the participants were recruited voluntarily upon response to an online advertisement on the university portal. The requirements were that all participants were consenting adults who met the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 1.

### 2.3 | Data collection

Participants attended one-to-one interviews which were conducted in person and recorded using a password-protected audio device. Prior to participation, an information sheet was distributed to outline the requirements and aims of the study and the expectations on the participating students. The participants were asked to email the researcher directly to express their interest to be interviewed and written consent was then obtained before the commencement of the interview. A total of six interviews were completed. The

transcription remained accurate to the audio recording and included all indications of speech dynamics, pauses, apparent mistakes and mishearings (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

### 2.4 | Data analysis

The data were analysed using IPA to establish themes and the significant meaning participants attached to their experiences (Smith, 2004). The analysis flexibly applied the six steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and included a line-by-line analysis of each of the participant's transcripts. Key words and phrases were coded before extracting themes to interpret the findings. After a series of themes were identified for each transcript, the data were then read together to identify patterns and similarities between individual accounts and to cluster themes with superordinate themes (Smith, 2004). To support the process of identifying themes, direct quotations were extracted from the data. The quotations were extracted and organised into the relevant theme headings. The process of labelling and re-labelling themes continued until the researcher felt that the interpretation of the data was accurate, and the summary of the findings had been reached (Smith et al., 2009). To promote good research practice, an informal member check of the themes was conducted by the research supervisor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 2.5 | Quality criteria and demonstrating trustworthiness

Strong qualitative research is sensitive to the context in which it is conducted (Yardley, 2008). Therefore, it was a paramount concern of this study to be considerate to the participants' experiences and social contexts and the relational dynamic between the researcher and participant. To check the validity of the findings during data analysis, Yardley's guidelines were utilised (Yardley, 2000, 2008). In qualitative research, it is only possible to identify themes that have been brought by the participants, but one cannot quantify the range of change in experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 2.6 | Ethical considerations

The BACP's ethical guidelines for research in the counselling professions (BACP, 2018) were adhered to throughout the study. Prior to recruitment commencing, a research proposal was submitted to the university's School of Health and Society ethics panel. The proposal detailed the aims and purpose of the research and the institute's expected involvement in the study. A copy of the draft interview questions, participant information sheet, and consent form were attached for review, and ethical approval was granted. All students were notified that anyone who chose to participate did so

TABLE 1 Participant inclusion/exclusion criteria and rationale

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale for criteria
Students completing a BSc. in counselling and psychotherapy (professional practice) at the University of Salford	Students from other courses who are not training specifically to become counsellors (e.g., BSc. psychology with counselling)	To ensure all participants were student counsellors on the same programme of study, which included the expectation of completing placement hours
Student counsellors who have attended the mindfulness and well-being module between the academic years 2017 and 2019	Students who have not attended the mindfulness and well-being module	To ensure that the participants being interviewed had experienced the same phenomenon
Students who experienced mindfulness practice as part of their counselling training and attended the mindfulness and well-being module	Counsellors in training who are based in other academic institutions	To create consistency among participants in that they had attended mindfulness training as part of their course at the same university

voluntarily and written consent was received from all participants via a consent form. For transparency, each participant was made aware of the expectations on them and why they were being asked to take part (Neuman, 2011). No benefits or incentives were offered to the students for their participation. Participating students were informed of their right to withdraw within the two-week period following their interview and that they would only be contacted during suitable, social hours (Gray, 2018). The withdrawal period was set because after this time the researcher would be analysing the data from all the interviews collectively; therefore, it would not be possible to extract individual data. The participant information sheet provided details of contacts for support services if a participant encountered psychological adverse effects brought forth by the interview content. It was clearly outlined that participants were not obligated to answer any of the researcher's questions. Furthermore, the onsite counselling suite at the university hosted all interviews to support safety and transparency (Danchev & Ross, 2013).

### 3 | FINDINGS

Four superordinate themes emerged from the data: becoming a counsellor, person-centred mindfulness, time, and learning and development. Under the four superordinate themes, 12 sub-themes emerged. A further selection process was systematically conducted for the distribution of findings. The data have been summarised and supported with direct extracts to honour the voices of participants and their contribution to themes. These themes are detailed in Table 2.

#### 3.1 | Superordinate theme one: Becoming a counsellor

I will be a better counsellor because of it.

(Participant Two)

#### 3.1.1 | Self-awareness (1.1)

The majority of the participants acknowledged an increased sense of self-awareness through the inclusion of mindfulness in their counselling training and shared how it had helped them identify with their inner experience and their understanding of themselves. One participant explored their sense of this with the repeated use of the word "part" when referring to self, demonstrating the identification of the different components of their experience and becoming familiar with how they view the "parts" of themselves interacting with one another:

It's enabled me to identify parts of myself that I don't think I would have been able to before...erm... and know that part of myself rather than being scared of that part of myself or trying to banish that part of myself.

(Participant Three)

There was an overall sense of the participants' self-awareness supporting self-acceptance. One participant acknowledged how mindfulness practice had invited them to become aware of their emotions when approaching difficult decisions and accept them into their experience without judgement:

Mindfulness, for sure, helps me to think through decisions in a different way and accept the feelings that I am experiencing around those decisions without judging them, just accepting them for what they are because that's what they are.

(Participant Two)

Some participants explored their sense of increased self-awareness through mindfulness practice creating space for self-acceptance: "mindfulness allows the space for self-acceptance" (Participant Six). One explained how mindful self-awareness supports them to be a "better counsellor": "I feel I am a healthier person, and I will be a better counsellor because of it" (Participant Two).

TABLE 2 Superordinate themes, sub-themes and key words

Superordinate themes	Sub-themes	Key words and concepts
1. Becoming a counsellor	1.1 Self-awareness 1.2. Client work 1.3 Safety and protection	Awareness of self, being a “better counsellor,” noticing, acceptance, understanding, ethical practice, safety, reflection, preparation, self-care, self-preservation, secondary trauma, anchor, protection
2. Person-centred mindfulness	2.1 The core conditions and Rogerian theory 2.2 Presence and connection 2.3 A way of “being”	Embodiment, connected, integrated, bodily awareness, alliance, genuine, present moment experiencing, flow, interwoven, emotional contact, focus, being
3. Time	3.1 Deepened understanding over time 3.2 Placement of module in counsellor training 3.3 Time for introducing mindfulness	Process, different times, contiguous, ever-changing, progression, the right time, journey, foundation, space, adapting, weighting, preparing, course, introducing into client work, base of training
4. Learning and development	4.1 Balance of theory and practice in learning 4.2 The peer group experience 4.3 Mindfulness as a “tool”	Knowledge, understanding, practice, theory, scientific, training, skill, interest, irritation, tool, resistance, educational, exploration, perspective, toolbox, transportable, space, coping tool

### 3.1.2 | Client work (1.2)

As the participants progressed through their counselling training, they began to reflect on how mindfulness impacted or may impact their client work. One participant focused on their ability to remain in the therapeutic environment within counselling sessions: “It [mindfulness] helps me to, kind of, refocus if I am losing psychological contact with a client” (Participant Two).

Another participant stated how mindfulness practised in between client sessions would ensure effective practice: “When I go to placement and I have got a client and I am seeing someone in an hour or so's time, I will be doing something in between to make sure I am at the same level” (Participant Three). Similarly, one participant spoke of how they practice mindfulness on the evening preceding their placement: “to have something that you can go to, to ground yourself actually in your practice but also that you can use to ground yourself the night before” (Participant Six).

### 3.1.3 | Safety and protection (1.3)

The concept of using mindfulness for emotional safety and protection for the student counsellor was raised by four of the participants. Each of those who explored this in their interviews identified their own use of mindfulness and how they felt that it was helpful to them as a counsellor in training for their emotional self-protection.

Several participants felt that this safety was important due to the unpredictability of what a client may bring to a session, with one participant recognising that protection may support student counsellors to avoid burnout and secondary trauma as a result of practice: “We'll never know when we go into a counselling session what issues the client is going to bring, and I think it would be quite easy to burn out or suffer secondary trauma” (Participant Four).

One participant used a range of metaphors to emphasise how they felt that mindfulness had created a safer space for them as a student counsellor:

It's like being in a swimming pool but tethering yourself to the sides so that you can be there, but you can pull yourself out of it and handle whatever is being presented.

(Participant Five)

The above extract gives an account of mindfulness “tethering” them to avoid drowning in the metaphorical swimming pool. The same participant went on to employ a second metaphor, referring to a chrysalis: “It's like spinning a cocoon. Not completely because I've still got to be able to see and hear, but it's like spinning a cocoon of protection around me” (Participant Five).

## 3.2 | Super-ordinate theme two: Person-centred mindfulness

Mindfulness and the core conditions are connected.

(Participant Two)

### 3.2.1 | The core conditions and Rogerian theory (2.1)

All participants reflected on how they found mindfulness complementary to PCT and shared how it enhanced their facilitation of the Rogerian core conditions to others and themselves. One participant described an “alliance” (Participant Two) between mindfulness and

person-centred theory. Several participants made a connection between mindfulness and the core conditions: "I think what mindfulness does for unconditional positive regard is by accepting yourself, you are more able to accept others" (Participant Three).

### 3.2.2 | Presence and connection (2.2)

The mindfulness module of the counselling training had a profound impact on how the student counsellors connected to themselves and others, with many of the interviewees reflecting on their sense of this in their training. One participant broadened this to encapsulate a core philosophy of the human experience: "I feel it's what being a human being is all about...that connection" (Participant Three).

Another participant shared how they had found that the connection they experienced enhanced their empathic understanding of others' experiences during the mindfulness sessions:

A connection, that is it. I have found that connection to others in mindfulness sessions quite a lot, and I have listened to other people and heard them say 'I felt really connected to you then' or 'I felt that'. I didn't feel pain, but I felt your pain, and I understood that.

(Participant Five)

### 3.2.3 | A way of "being" (2.3)

For some, it was felt that mindfulness in their training had enabled them to embody the Rogerian way of being (Rogers, 1980). The word "being" or "to be" reoccurred throughout the interviews and was reported by the majority of participants with regard to their training and mindfulness practice. One participant shared that mindfulness had given them the ability to "be" more in the moment with difficulty: "don't try to predict what comes next, just be with it in that moment" (Participant Two).

## 3.3 | Superordinate theme three: Time

Timing is everything.

(Participant Six)

### 3.3.1 | Deepened understanding over time (3.1)

Both participants who reflected on their experience of mindfulness in their training deepening over time were third-year students. Being at the end of their undergraduate training meant that they had an ideal viewpoint to assess how mindfulness had changed over the three-year course, having completed the mindfulness module in

the first year of their training. One stated: "I think about mindfulness and being mindful differently as time goes on" (Participant Six), whilst the other shared: "I see the connection, yeah, that different things connect at different times" (Participant Two).

Both third-year students acknowledged that their use and understanding of mindfulness changed as they moved from the taught aspects of their course into the client work during their placement in the second and third year: "Although, I didn't see it before, I have felt it as the course has gone on and for sure once I got into practice" (Participant Two).

Another participant shared how they were not able to conceptualise the mindfulness module until they started their placement and shared how they felt their introduction to mindfulness had aided their learning through the rest of the course:

I didn't recognise it at the time in that first semester. I thought 'It is just a module. We are just learning about mindfulness and that's it. It sits alone in isolation' ... but, particularly since I started in placement, erm...as I reflect on it...I see that how I've accessed my learning from there...erm...and, kind of, accessed some of the practices from there.

(Participant Two)

### 3.3.2 | Placement of module in counsellor training (3.2)

Each of the participants felt that the mindfulness module was in the appropriate place in the course. Many reflected on how, having experienced mindfulness in the first year of their training, they were able to apply mindfulness to other areas of their training and their lives more generally. There was a particular emphasis on how the mindfulness module was complementary to the counselling skills module and participants referenced how this had supported their learning and wellbeing: "It has been really helpful. I think particularly in one of the second-year modules when we were doing skills" (Participant Two).

It was acknowledged that the placement in the first year was helpful due to the self-exploration of the training: "Mindfulness was so helpful that first year when you are finding out about yourself and what counselling is about and the journey ahead" (Participant Six). They expanded on how they felt that the mindfulness module gave the course a base for further learning and development: "It put that foundation in place in the course at the right time before you go into placement" (Participant Six).

### 3.3.3 | Time for introducing mindfulness (3.3)

Some participants felt that timing was significant regarding when they felt mindfulness was appropriate—or not—to share with clients. Participants reflected on the importance of it being the "right time"

for mindfulness to be introduced to students, specifically commenting on how for some it may not have been the right time for mindfulness in their lives, but that they could return to it later: "It might not be for you right now. It might not be for you yet, but it might be for you at a different time" (Participant Two).

Another participant appeared certain that peers who first dismissed mindfulness would come back to it later in their career: "That might help someone in the future or help them in the future. I think that they will discover it later on" (Participant Three).

### 3.4 | Superordinate theme four: Learning and development

"Here at university, mindfulness, it's the same, but in a different way" (Participant Five).

#### 3.4.1 | Balance of theory and practice (4.1)

Participants raised how they experienced a clear distinction between the theoretical and experiential elements of the mindfulness module within their training. All participants felt that both were valid and necessary for learning: "Being taught it, you are, kind of, given the knowledge, but being able to experience it you feel the benefit of it rather than understanding the benefit, so I am in a situation now where I have got both" (Participant One).

Many of the participants showed a preference for the practice of mindfulness and some scepticism towards the taught, theory-based lectures: "At the time, I wasn't sure about the theory behind it, but I was, kind of, more interested about how the practice would be and how the practice would help, impact, and support" (Participant Two).

In contrast, another student was enthusiastic at the prospect of theory and found the lecturer's use of scientific literature academically stimulating. They used a metaphor of a puzzle to illustrate how they found the theory and practical elements of the module to be married together:

It is fantastic the way that it has been integrated. It is like a jigsaw puzzle... erm... it's like a jigsaw puzzle inside a puzzle. You have got the emotional mindfulness and then the educational bit. The academic comes around the outside. It enhances it.

(Participant Five)

#### 3.4.2 | The peer group experience (4.2)

There was a significant amount of emphasis on participants' experiences of mindfulness as part of a peer group within a university environment. There was a mix of experiences ranging from difficult to positive. One participant found the group practice to be particularly negative and openly shared their frustration towards peers who

they felt had disrupted their learning and dismissed what they felt to be the benefits of mindfulness practice:

The thing that really irritated me was other students' attitude towards mindfulness. I found that really frustrating. It was like people were really switched off to it. They were really resistant to it.

(Participant Three).

#### 3.4.3 | Mindfulness as a "tool" (4.3)

Participants were unanimous in referring to mindfulness in relation to a tool, toolbox or resource and described mindfulness as a "tool" or technique that they could use in their therapeutic work and their self-care practice. Participant One shared: "It gives you tools to use in your toolbox in terms of working in practice and being able to share your experience with clients." Equivalently, Participant Four supported this by referring to their mindfulness practise as: "a resource that I can use... especially when things are feeling a little bit tense."

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The findings highlighted the participants' understanding of the inclusion of mindfulness into the curriculum in two ways: first, it influenced their development during their three-year programme; second, mindfulness facilitated their self-awareness for self-efficacy and ethical practice. Additionally, the participants identified their developing sense of self as a practitioner through their training. They also shared what mindfulness had meant to them and how they practised these values and considerations through their training.

The research findings show that the participants experienced a change over time: mindfulness made more sense to students over time as they progressed through their counselling degrees. The progression of students' learning, and their experience, was aided by the introduction of mindfulness within their first year of training and was significant to each of the participants. The increased understanding of mindfulness throughout the course may be complementary to the professional process, as the application of mindfulness changed over the three-year course. Participants in their final year found that they were better able to embody mindfulness and create a sense of understanding of its place and purpose from a professional and academic perspective than when the mindfulness module was introduced in the first year of their training.

The findings support the view that mindfulness incorporated into training aids trainee counsellors' development as they become a professional and work to the integral values of the counselling profession. As demonstrated in the client work (1.1) section of the findings chapter, student counsellors described practising mindfulness before and after client work for self-care and to ensure a level of professionalism is maintained for their clients. Given



that the BACP mandatorily requires student counsellors to undertake personal and professional development groups, the research raises awareness and asks further questions regarding what student counsellors are attributing their development to, such as mindfulness practice or mindful awareness, and what they do not feel has been significant.

When working therapeutically with clients, there is a requirement to effectively form a therapeutic alliance (Rogers, 1957). Therefore, it may be that the therapist is required to enter a space of vulnerability to meet their client where they are, person to person (Rogers & Stevens, 1973). The experiential theme of vulnerability in the research study is complemented by supporting sub-themes that arose in the study's findings including self-awareness, safety and protection, and a way of being. Concrete issues of safety and protection rest on the metaphors from the participants explaining their understanding of distance and emotional armour. The protection and safety themes in the research explore how the student counsellors felt that mindfulness facilitated a safe distance of protection. However, this emotional armour works both ways and has the potential to block counsellors working at relationship depth (Cooper, 2005). An increased risk of psychological impact to the counsellor is created through the increase of empathy in the counselling relationship as empathy narrows the "psychological distance between therapist and client" (Brockhouse et al., 2011, p. 7). One participant supported this awareness of psychological distance in the counselling room and stated that mindfulness had aided their ability to refocus within the session upon losing psychological contact with their client.

Mirroring the relationship between empathy and vulnerability, the findings show a conflict between a counsellor "being" with their clients as a whole person and maintaining a "safe" distance, given that counselling is a courageous act that exposes the individual to the risk of vulnerability and experiencing difficulty. Arguably, both connection through "being" and "safety" from an emotional distance cannot exist simultaneously, for a person is likely to fluctuate between closeness and distance, dependent on their perceived level of emotional safety (Herman, 1992). This raises further questions as to whether a therapist can wear their emotional armour whilst being present and connected with their client in order to meet them emotionally where they are, as they are. Benner (1984) described the relationship between a practitioner and their patient as: "a kaleidoscope of intimacy and distance" (Benner, 1984, p. xxi). This rings true in the findings of this research study: the participants' balance between the perceived safety of distance and the vulnerability of emotional intimacy.

The results of the study are comparable to those reported by Baker (2016), whereby participants reported difficulty identifying whether it was their mindfulness practice or the development of counselling skills during their training that had increased their sense of presence with clients. Similarly, questions were asked regarding whether presence would have increased through counselling training without the component of mindfulness in the course. Equivalently, due to the selection bias which is evident in many reviewed studies

and is acknowledged in the research presented for this dissertation, the participants were likely to have had a pre-existing positive stance towards mindfulness prior to choosing to participate in the study and are likely to attribute significance to mindfulness; therefore, framing their experience in a positive light.

The person-centred theory rests on the belief that effective therapy exists in the authentic recognition of the individual and the acceptance of the whole person in a therapeutic environment. Kabat-Zinn (2009a) suggests that mindfulness is supported by the Rogerian condition of unconditional positive regard (UPR) (Rogers, 1951) when he describes that UPR "frames very well what is required of us teachers or therapists to protect and deepen the intentional holding and honouring that lie at the core of all good therapy" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009a, p. x). All participants in the study referred to mindfulness complementing and enhancing their understanding of the person-centred therapeutic approach and their own sense of facilitating presence and of the core conditions to others and towards themselves. This way of being in the therapeutic space supports both the counsellor and the client to effectively "meet" and create a foundation for working at relational depth (Cooper, 2005). The work of Geller and Porges (2014) supports this finding; they reflect that, without a therapeutic presence in the therapist-client relationship, the "intervention will be limited in its efficacy" (p. 188). This facilitation of counselling practice through presence links in with the theme "a way of being" which was uncovered in the findings of this research (see 2.3). Furthermore, the findings support Williams et al.'s (2008) initial suggestion that the integration of mindfulness into training courses could increase the capacity to "stay present" (p. 314) and increase the overall sense of self-awareness.

The participants in this study may have chosen to label their experiences as mindfulness as a result of experiencing mindfulness within their training programme. However, this could have been occurring regardless of mindfulness practice in the course, and they have attributed meaning to this because they had been provided the language to make sense of their experience of counselling training and development of their counselling skills. Arguably, the core conditions are unable to exist without having a process kindred to mindfulness (Clare, 2018; Jooste et al., 2015), when self-awareness and connection to self and others is a requirement of PCT and supported by the principles and moral qualities outlined by the BACP's (2016) ethical guidelines. The BACP list 13 key personal qualities which they specify: "members and registrants are strongly encouraged to aspire" (BACP, 2016, p. 10). One could suggest that these personal qualities are innate, and the role of training is to cultivate these qualities in a similar way to that in which mindfulness appears to cultivate innate mindful qualities to enable the embodiment of the Rogerian core conditions required for person-centred therapy (Jooste et al., 2015).

Rogers (1967) acknowledged a paradox in person-centred theory when he wrote: "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change" (1967, p. 16). Similarly, Kabat-Zinn outlined: "meditation is a non-doing. It has no goal other than for

you to be yourself" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 37). PCT does not generally employ the implementation of tools or goal-oriented interventions in therapeutic work, yet during the interviews, the participants who described themselves as person-centred, who were training in person-centred theory, also described using mindfulness as a "tool" and/or "resource" for therapeutic work and practitioner self-care. Rogers (1967) acknowledged that the client determines the direction of the therapy. Equally, participants reflected that they would only consider introducing mindfulness into therapeutic work if they had a strong sense that it would be helpful to their clients.

Fernández-Álvarez et al. (2016), present the concept of "home theory": where the therapist will work from their traditional therapeutic approach "yet utilise selectively and occasionally a specific intervention from another orientation" (Fernández-Álvarez et al., 2016, p. 821). It is possible to associate some resemblance and comparability between home theory and Bowlby's secure base (1988): a human being requiring a solid foundation based on a safe, consistent attachment first before venturing from this base to explore new, unfamiliar experiences. Cooper and McLeod (2011, p. 10) state, "to be person-centred means to be someone who acknowledges the vast diversity and unknowability of human beings". "Using" mindfulness in a person-centred manner from the foundation of person-centred theory would demonstrate the counsellor operating appropriately from their "home" approach and acknowledging the diversity of the human experience. Nevertheless, further exploration outside of the realms of this dissertation would be required to explore the appropriateness of integrating mindfulness practice into person-centred therapy.

## 5 | CONCLUSION—IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The student counsellors who participated in this study applied individual meaning to their experiences and used their experience to guide their development and understanding of person-centred theory and their own approach to their training in person-centred counselling. This finding does not appear to have been observed in the previous research that has been consulted in the process of this study. The research builds on existing evidence that mindfulness is supportive in enhancing therapeutic presence and the trainee counsellor's ability to work in the present moment (Baker, 2016). It would be of interest to expand upon this study with the further collection of quantitative data through measuring and evaluating quantitative questionnaires to display empirical measurements of what has been suggested by this study.

The findings exhibit consistency with the previous literature reviewed, suggesting a relationship between mindfulness and increased connection to self and others through the enhancement of presence within counselling training (Baker, 2016; Gehart & McCollum, 2010; Geller & Porges, 2014). Due to this study's particular focus on person-centred counselling training, it adds to the research base in that it presents the finding that counsellors are

experiencing mindfulness to be beneficial to their training, and many are attributing much of their counselling skills' development to their positive experience with mindfulness meditation introduced in the first year of the course. It is suggested that the timing of the mindfulness training is significant and that the students' experience changed as they progressed through their professional training from student to a qualified counsellor.

The initial literature search found no studies that included the perspectives of undergraduate counselling students and how they have experienced mindfulness as part of their counselling training. This study entered uncharted territory by exploring the experiences of undergraduate, person-centred student counsellors who had experienced mindfulness integrated into their training as a core module. Therefore, the study has begun to bridge that gap. Although the study had not set out to do so, it collected data from participants specifically ranging across the years of the programme ( $n = 6$  participants—two from each of the three years of study). This evenly distributed sample was organic in its formulation and unintentional (no researcher intervention) yet enabled the data collected to represent different perspectives of the same programme and presented a significant finding related to the development of skills and understanding over time.

The strengths of the study lie in its idiographic, in-depth exploration of student person-centred counsellors' experiences of mindfulness in their training. The experiences and reflections brought forth in this study were framed within a positive context and relationship with mindfulness. Each of the participants openly communicated that they felt that mindfulness was a welcomed additional element within their counselling training. Even those who described feeling apprehensive at first shared that they began to experience the worth they believed the mindfulness model had in their training programme. Nonetheless, although not represented in this study, it must be noted that mindfulness is not a welcomed element for all, and there has been a rise in critiques of mindfulness and questions related to its appropriateness (Nanay, 2017; Walsh, 2016).

### 5.1 | Reflexivity

The researcher believes IPA, mindfulness, and person-centred theory to be complementary of one another due to their commitment to their idiosyncratic and explorative nature of enquiry in their shared philosophy. This insight has given the researcher a deeper sense of respect and understanding of the richness and complexity of the data; equally, the researcher acknowledges the potential for bias that this presents.

### 5.2 | Limitations

The researcher is a counsellor, was (at the time of the study) a post-graduate student at the same university as the participants, and a mindfulness teacher and appreciates that it would not be possible to

remove these elements from the collection and interpretation of the data and the potential for bias that these factors introduce. Likewise, the research supervisor was the mindfulness module lead and had personal interest and investment in the research area as a result.

It is acknowledged that participants completed the theoretical elements of the mindfulness and wellbeing module first and stated that they were aware of the potential benefits of mindfulness prior to their introduction to mindfulness practice. Also, those who volunteered to participate are likely to have had a pre-established interest in mindfulness, previous experience of mindfulness practice, and already have positive opinions of mindfulness. These acknowledgements of potential participant bias are a consistent limitation of previous studies (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014; Van Dam et al., 2018). Furthermore, it could also be argued that there could be pressure to agree with the group or the research that is presented, especially when in a peer-group environment. The group perspective, group learning, and development among peers appeared significant to the participants. Therefore, future research could employ greater numbers of participants and the use of focus groups to explore this avenue further. However, researchers have suggested that mindfulness course participants may be unlikely to share a negative experience for concerns of speaking out, particularly when experiencing shame or within a group or educational setting (Britton & Sydnor, 2015; Burrows, 2017; Farias & Wikholm, 2016; Lindahl et al., 2017). There also appears to be a lack of mindfulness research exploring prevalence and experiences of those who begin, but do not complete, mindfulness studies or programmes.

### 5.3 | Recommendations

The research was conducted at one university in the North-West of England, UK. It would be useful to complete the research in other higher education institutes. A qualitative approach was selected for this study to capture the essence and experience of individual participants. A mixed-methods approach could be adopted for further research to examine the scale and quantity of experience and develop a comprehensive, holistic approach to understanding the research topic. Alternatively, quantitative methods could also be useful to determine the impact that the integration of mindfulness into the course has on the trainee counsellors and their training in PCT. It is acknowledged that it would be useful for future researchers to utilise the MBI:TAC tool to measure this impact. Time appeared to play a significant role in participants' experiences and was evident in their reflections. It would be of interest to move forward with this theme in further research and collect a longitudinal body of data to explore the changes in student counsellors' perspectives and follow their development throughout their training with a broader number of participants, and capture the views of participants across a greater scope of age range and ethnic backgrounds. This qualitative methodology was purposely selected, and the study was developed to capture a broad understanding of the student counsellors' overall experience of mindfulness in their

person-centred training. However, further research could use a mixed-method approach so that data collection could include statistical measurements at each year of the counsellors' training to record any statistical variance over time.

The student counsellors who participated in the study appeared to be engaged in a philosophical tangle of what it meant to be a good person-centred therapist and the place of mindfulness in person-centred training. Accordingly, the last recommendation would be that mindfulness modules incorporated into person-centred counselling programmes be remodelled to inform "person-centred mindfulness," to create distance from the previous goal-oriented approaches.

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