

ABSTRACT - LIVING A MINDFUL LIFE: AN HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SECULAR MINDFULNESS, COMPASSION AND INSIGHT Jane Kellock Arnold, PhD

This research study explores the experience and effects of long-term practice by six student practitioners of secular mindfulness, compassion and insight forming the Mindfulness-Based Living model incorporated into the MSc in Mindfulness Studies at the University of Aberdeen. A review of existing literature on the topic of mindfulness highlights that research is predominantly postpositivist and quantitative in approach, only recently incorporating limited qualitative studies, and is focused chiefly on mindfulness as a treatment for a range of mental and physical disorders. However, the nature of mindfulness particularly when practised in conjunction with compassion and insight suggests that it is a more intense, complex, nuanced and pervasive experience than is reflected in the literature. An exploration of Buddhist and Western phenomenology highlights important parallels with contemporary secular mindfulness studies indicating, firstly, the value of an in-depth qualitative study capable of surfacing potentially transformative effects of the practice of mindfulness and related disciplines, and, secondly, the potential relevance of mindfulness to the praxis of phenomenological research. Towards these aims, this study utilises an hermeneutic phenomenological approach incorporating mindfulness approaches in its execution. The study takes a dialogical approach, intentionally surfacing the inherent dynamic between researcher and participant. Interview data were collected from participants on multiple occasions over durations of between seven and twelve months and are presented as rich narrative texts organised around emergent themes. Analysis indicates the occurrence of intense, embodied, authentic transcendental experiences that pervade day-to-day life and extend beyond a remedial effect. Researcher data indicate the usefulness of mindfulness to the practice of phenomenological research, supporting embodied interview and phenomenological reduction. The study highlights findings useful to the design of secular programmes and to further research, notably the incorporation of compassion and insight approaches, the centrality of embodiment, and the effects of long term practice on social cohesion.