Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy /
Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie
ISSN 0826-3893 Vol. 50 No. 2 © 2016 Pages 91–107

Exploring the Contributions of a Yoga Practice to Counsellor Education
Explorer les contributions potentielles du yoga à la formation des conseillers

Sarah R. Pittoello
Acadia University

ABSTRACT

Students in a master's of education counselling program were offered an ashtanga vinyasa yoga course, and were asked to explore their experience with and the perceived outcomes of engaging in a yoga practice. Data were collected using surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews within a qualitative framework. Nine participants described the contribution of a yoga practice through three themes: structure and support, present-centred experience, and personal and professional benefits. These themes provide a model for considering how contemplative practices may serve counsellor education. The value of an embodied, contemplative practice in counsellor training, the importance of having an experienced yoga teacher, and further research are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre d'un programme de maîtrise en counseling éducationnel, les étudiants ont eu accès à un cours d'ashtanga vinyasa yoga, pour permettre d'explorer leur expérience de s'engager dans une pratique du yoga, ainsi que les résultats qu'ils en ont perçus. Les données qualitatives ont été recueillies au moyen de sondages, de groupes de consultation, et d'entrevues approfondies. Neuf participants ont décrit la contribution de la pratique du yoga en fonction de trois thématiques : structure et soutien, expérience centrée sur le présent, et avantages personnels et professionnels. Ces thématiques fournissent un modèle qui permet d'examiner comment les pratiques contemplatives peuvent être mises au service de la formation des conseillers. On discute de l'importance d'intégrer une pratique contemplative dans la formation des conseillers et de faire appel à un professeur de yoga chevronné, ainsi que des perspectives de recherche.

The relationship between the personal development and self-care of counselling students and their professional success as counsellors has been well documented in the literature (Shapiro, Brown, & Beigel, 2007; Stauffer, 2007; Valente & Marotta, 2005). Although self-care has been identified as essential in counselling training and early in counselling careers (Christopher & Maris, 2010), little is being offered in counselling programs to teach and support students in self-care practices (Shapiro et al., 2007; Valente & Marotta, 2005). A number of studies have explored the implementation of eastern contemplative practices—including mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and qi'gong—into counselling education programs over the past eight years (Chrisman, Christopher, & Lichtenstein, 2008; Christopher et al.,

2011; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Grepmair et al., 2007; Maris, 2009; McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2007; Wolf, Mott, Thompson, Baggs, & Puig, 2010). Much of the literature on contemplative practices in counselling education has centred around mindfulness, defined as "a type of awareness that entails being fully conscious of present-moment experience and attending to thoughts, emotions and sensations as they arise without judgment and with equanimity" (Christopher & Maris, 2010, p. 115). The term "mindfulness" refers not only to this awareness, but also to its practice.

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program is the most well-researched and frequently utilized mindfulness-based program (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003; Schure et al., 2008; Shapiro, Aston, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). One of the primary goals of the MBSR program was to create a "training vehicle for the relief of suffering" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 148), which would be "adaptable to any context in which stress, emotional and physical pain, or illness and disease were primary concerns" (p. 149). The scope of the MBSR program has extended beyond supporting individuals with chronic pain, stress, anxiety, depressive relapses, and disordered eating (Baer, 2003) to managing the stress of health professionals, medical students, and counselling students. MBSR participants cultivate mindfulness in three central practices: body scan, yoga, and meditation.

Within academic counselling programs, mindfulness practices have been presented to counselling students in various forms: an MBSR-based course offered for credit (Chrisman et al., 2008; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Schure et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2007); mindfulness practices taught within the existing curricula (McCollum & Gehart, 2010); meditation practice immediately prior to working with clients (Grepmair et al., 2007); and a noncredit yoga course offered to counsellors and counselling students (Wolf et al., 2010). In the MA program in contemplative psychotherapy offered at Naropa University (Boulder, Colorado), mindfulness is the philosophical and practical foundation of the curriculum.

In each of these studies, counselling students have cultivated many skills and qualities that enhance counselling presence and process: self-awareness (Shapiro et al., 2007; Stauffer, 2007); self-compassion and compassion for others (Shapiro et al., 2007); cultivation of empathic responses (Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Stauffer, 2007); increased comfort with silence (Schure et al., 2008); greater attention to the client and therapeutic process (Schure et al., 2008; Stauffer, 2007); changes in view of and attitude toward therapy (Schure et al., 2008); increased capacity for interpersonal functioning and resolving conflict (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008; Stauffer, 2007); development of self-experience and self-regulation (Grepmair et al., 2007); and counsellor self-care and well-being (Schure et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2007).

Christopher et al. (2011) published the first longitudinal study of counselling students who practice mindfulness. Sixteen counsellors, who participated in a mindfulness course within their counselling program 2 to 6 years previously, reported positive impacts on their personal life, including physical, emotional,

and cognitive changes; increased self-awareness and self-acceptance; improved interpersonal relationships; increased acceptance and compassion; and reduced emotional reactivity. Professionally, counsellors described the benefits of mindfulness practice in three areas: (a) their experience of themselves while counselling, specifically heightened awareness, acceptance, presence, and diminished reactivity; (b) the therapeutic relationship, with increased awareness and acceptance; and (c) their clinical practice, including their use of techniques, their level of comfort, and their conceptual framework of counselling.

Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, and Sephton (2009) argued that yoga "offers a compelling opportunity to practice mindfulness" (p. 69). Two studies have explored the benefits of yoga for counsellors and counselling students. Valente and Marotta (2005) found that the influence of yoga training on the personal and professional lives of six licensed psychotherapists with a regular yoga practice included (a) internal/self-awareness, (b) balance, (c) acceptance of self and others, and (d) yoga as a way of life. Wolf et al. (2010) used a quantitative methodology to explore the effects on female counsellors and counsellors-in-training of a 4-week "luna" yoga program, designed specifically for women. Although both the experimental group and delayed-treatment control groups demonstrated improvement in wellness, there were no statistically significant differences. The authors suggested that gathering qualitative data about the participants' perceived benefits would be beneficial.

In this study, a qualitative methodology was employed to explore counselling students' experience with and perceived outcomes of engaging in a yoga practice over 8 weeks. As the first qualitative study focusing exclusively on the practice of yoga for counselling students, this design created an opportunity for themes to emerge from the data, with the narratives of the participants offering insight into their experiences (Patton, 2002).

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from a master of education counselling program's full-time cohort in a small Canadian university. Ten of 16 members of the full-time counselling cohort joined the study, and 9 of those participants—8 full-time students and 1 part-time student—participated through the 10 weeks of research. The participants, 8 females and 1 male, were in the third month of their program. Participants came to the research with a wide variety of experience of yoga. None of the participants had previous formal counselling training, but they all described informal experience as counsellors. Although the yoga classes were offered free of charge, no additional incentives were offered to participate in the research.

Data Collection

Participants committed to practicing yoga three times a week for 8 weeks. Each week included (a) a mandatory 75-minute yoga class, (b) an optional class during which participants practiced the ashtanga yoga sequence individually with the

instructor's support, and (c) one or two practices at home, which could be either the ashtanga sequence or their own practice. To deepen their experience of the yoga course, each week the participants were provided with a three- to six-page piece of original writing on yoga philosophy, reflection questions, and references, written and compiled by the researcher.

Ashtanga vinyasa yoga, a dynamic form of hatha yoga taught by modern Indian teacher Pattabhi Jois, provided the structure for the practice. Here, the practice of yoga refers to a practice of asana, or postures, which involves bringing one's attention to the body, breath, gaze, and *bandha* (i.e., internal locks) within a set progressive series of postures (Jois, 1999). In comparison to the yoga taught in the MBSR program, the ashtanga sequence was more vigorous and included more challenging postures. The ashtanga practice also emphasized concentration—continuing to bring one's attention back to the felt sensations of the body and breath—in comparison to the mindful moment-to-moment awareness described in the MBSR yoga by Kabat-Zinn (1990).

The data collection included recruitment and orientation, an opening focus group and qualitative survey (consisting of nine open-ended questions), two midstudy focus groups, three semistructured interviews, and a closing focus group and survey (consisting of 10 open-ended questions). Approval for this study was received from a research ethics board.

The recruitment took place during the participants' first prepracticum class (i.e., a counselling skills course). An orientation session was held one week following the recruitment to provide a more detailed explanation of the research, describe the approach to yoga practice, review the general consent forms, and allow participants to ask questions and voice concerns. As this course was an additional commitment over and above their counselling program, a schedule for the yoga classes and focus groups was negotiated.

The opening focus group and qualitative survey—discovering the participants' experiences as beginning counsellors and their previous experience of yoga—preceded the yoga course. These two methods of data collection were complementary, providing both a group and a private opportunity to share. These data allowed the yoga course to be presented in a relevant way. All of the focus groups were both audio and video recorded.

Two 30-minute semistructured focus groups took place at the beginning of the third and seventh weeks of yoga classes. The themes and structure of the focus groups provided an opportunity for the group to reflect on their experience of the practice and the ways in which it was contributing to their counselling education. The focus groups allowed participants to share their struggles and experiences, build a supportive community, and provide the instructor with an opportunity to teach yoga in a way that was responsive to their experiences.

A final focus group was held one week following the last yoga class. Participants were also given 10 open-ended questions for a final private reflection: 6 participants were given surveys after the final focus group and 3 participants were interviewed before the final focus group. Choosing 3 participants with a diverse experience

of yoga practice for the interviews—a first-time practitioner; a practitioner with a short-term, intensive practice; and a practitioner with a well-established practice of over 20 years—allowed for illumination of the other data sources and, in particular, provided specific examples of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the research. The interviews were 60 minutes in length, audio recorded, and followed a semistructured interview protocol that evolved throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed throughout the process exclusively by the researcher. The data were analyzed inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

The focus group videos were watched as a whole and then each of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed from audio recordings. Following the transcription, the complete recordings were listened to again to ensure accuracy. Each statement from the focus groups, interviews, and surveys that described the participants' experience of yoga was listed with equal value. These statements were grouped into categories, each given a descriptive name, and the number of participants who described each was recorded. These categories became subthemes, which were then grouped into three broader themes. The transcripts were reread to ensure that each perspective was captured and no additional data were created. The narrative for each subtheme was constructed and sent to each of the participants with their quotations highlighted, providing an opportunity to ensure they were fairly represented.

Researcher

The researcher, a daily yoga practitioner for 8 years and a yoga teacher for 5, taught the yoga classes. The researcher was a master's counselling thesis student, who was neither the students' prepracticum instructor nor their peer. The motivation for this study came from the researcher's personal experience of the ways in which her long-time, dedicated yoga practice supported her own counsellor education and practice, and her curiosity about how it may also serve others. The aim of the researcher was to recognize and understand her own perceptions and biases in order to minimize their influence on the data analysis.

The role of participant-observer (Patton, 2002) held by the yoga teacher/researcher required ongoing reflexivity in regard to the data to ensure both a responsive stance to the research participants as students of yoga and that the teaching itself responded dynamically to insights gained from the data (Silverman, 2005). The analyses are consistent with the overall responsive stance as participant-observer, acknowledging the "intimate and habitual concern with context which is foundational to qualitative methodology" (Mason, 2006, p. 17), which respects that such data can hold meaning only within the particular experiential context. Cross-comparison of data sources served to corroborate findings across the sources as well as revealing unique perspectives that merit illumination. As a form of triangulation (Mason, 2006), this approach assisted

in determining which findings were more substantial while ensuring that valuable minority experiences were not discarded. Providing participants with an opportunity to read the transcripts, along with the cross-reference of different data sources, provided further support for the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296).

FINDINGS

The participants described the experience and perceived outcomes of engaging in the yoga practice in three major themes: (a) the structure and support of the yoga course, (b) present-centred experience, and (c) the personal and professional fruits of the practice,[1] as shown in Table 1. The number of participants who spoke to each theme and subtheme is listed in parentheses.

Table 1
Themes and Subthemes Describing the Contribution of Yoga to Counsellor Education

Themes	Subthemes
Structure and support	Yoga techniques and physical adjustments (8) Structure of the yoga course (7) Support of the group and teacher (7)
Present-centred experience	Acceptance (9) Awareness and self-knowledge (9) Letting go (8)
Fruits of the practice	Personal benefits of the practice (9) Counselling presence (9) Counselling process and techniques (8)

Note. The number of participants describing these subthemes is shown in parentheses.

Structure and Support

All participants described the contributions of the structure and support in three areas: yoga techniques and physical adjustments, the structure of the yoga course, and the support of the group and instructor.

Yoga techniques and physical adjustments. Eight participants felt supported by learning about yoga techniques, particularly details about the postures and how to tailor the practice for themselves. This knowledge supported the participants in maintaining a home practice. Working with the breath was discussed by nearly every participant. Beginning practitioners described a newly discovered awareness of the breath: "It's something that we do that we take for granted … and how often do we focus on our breathing? Before yoga, probably never." Physical adjustments allowed the participants to recognize their abilities and changes in their bodies. This hands-on interaction with the teacher allowed them to recognize their resistance to change and reminded them that there is always more to learn.

Structure of the yoga course. All participants found the structure and schedule of the yoga class to be important. The course supported participants in "mentally slotting out" time for themselves:

> Sometimes if I'm on R for race all the time, I'm not stopping and doing that reflecting that I need to do … So to me, that's a bigger component than coming to class, is the stuff that happens when you leave class.

Practicing at regular times, in addition to knowing others in the group, added a sense of accountability for some participants: "It made you build in that self-care piece, whereas normally you might neglect it." Another participant also described the practice as self-care:

> [Yoga has] joined the studies as a way of self-care, as something I was missing in my life, that sort-of grounding, that time for me … to quietly work out stuff … It seems to have now formed some kind of kinship.

One participant described making the choice to come to the yoga class as "empowering," as it was an opportunity to make a choice that supported her well-being.

Support of the group and teacher. The structure of the group enriched friendships and created a community with a wide variety of backgrounds: "It has been very rewarding to blend people together, a multicultural sort of experience in becoming more open to a variety of perceptions while walking the same path." A first-time practitioner felt encouraged and supported by colleagues with more experience, while experienced participants felt accepted and encouraged in their interest in yoga by their peers. Practicing together as a group also provided a sense of community to their personal work. Many participants valued their relationship with the teacher for technical and moral support, encouragement to take risks, and support in learning from their mistakes.

Present-Centred Experience

Participants described present-centred experience in three subthemes: acceptance, awareness and self-knowledge, and letting go.

Acceptance. Participants described learning to work with their bodies, thoughts, and emotions by slowing down to find their own pace, using and focusing on the breath, asking questions, finding appropriate modifications of the postures, and cultivating patience. One participant described acceptance in relation to working with the residue of a prior illness:

> My past illness and rehabilitation had me a little worried about my abilities and limitations. There were times that I was overwhelmed or afraid of pain … This also translated to going where my body needed to go that day and inner listening and respecting.

When participants encountered unexpected challenges, they began to focus on what they were learning and gaining from the practice, in order to "embrace it rather than try to fix it." They began to describe and embody patience, accept-

ance, and a willingness to take small steps and work within their limitations in a variety of ways:

> Through the practice, I have learned how to modify things that my body can't do yet, and I've been watching for the changes as my body gradually allows me to do it … granting myself that time to learn and to let my body do what it's willing to do.

As participants engaged with these challenges, they began to see small changes and exceed their expectations, which provided motivation to practice.

Awareness and self-knowledge. Many participants described a heightened awareness—in both their counselling sessions and their personal lives—in relation to the breath and the body. Many participants described a heightened body-awareness. They felt the practice "informed" them, and felt "attuned to my body and what it needs," which allowed them to respond to their bodies' signals in beneficial ways. For example, participants listened to their bodies to know when they needed a break, and used yoga postures or breathing between clients. Participants described a new-found awareness of the relationship between their bodies and emotions.

An awareness of their breath, and the practice of returning to it as an anchor for their attention, cultivated greater self-awareness, released anxiety, supported relaxation, relaxed tension in the body, and allowed them to listen more fully. One participant also drew a parallel between yoga and counselling in terms of the awareness of the breath:

> Just like for counselling it's not necessarily the process or the strategy that you use … it's more of how you listen and how you bring yourself to that practice. And the same thing in yoga, it's not necessarily the posture you're in … [it's] how the breath opens you to listening to yourself.

Awareness cultivated in the yoga practice was described in relation to the process of knowing one's self:

> At first when you're becoming a counsellor, who you are as a person is something you really need to dive into a little bit and get to know … one of the ways that I have learned to do that best is through yoga.

One participant reflected that with self-knowledge comes responsibility for one's actions and humility, as they began to recognize in themselves those things they criticize in others.

Letting go. Participants discussed taking time and space, opening, accepting, letting go, and trusting, recognizing how "just noticing" or bringing awareness to an aspect of themselves related to letting go. Letting go was described in various ways, including an opportunity to "unwind," "slow down," "contemplate and reflect," "actually work things out," and "creat[e] space." The process of letting go was also described in a number of ways: from bringing awareness to habitual patterns and learning to let them go, to the process of letting go of the body in the yoga practice, in counselling sessions, and in their daily lives. Participants also related letting go to trust:

> I just need to … [get] myself, my head out of the way, so that I can just let go and trust that my body knows what I need. And the answers do come from within; I just create the environment to listen.

In the interviews specifically, participants described letting go in relation to experiences of vulnerability in the yoga classes, in relation to the content of the counselling program, and in counselling-like situations: "At different points in this program, I feel very vulnerable, because we're poking and prodding in places that we may never have been or have chosen to go, and now we're face to face with it." Letting go, of thoughts for example, was experienced differently between newer and more experienced practitioners: newer practitioners described focusing only on practice during class, whereas more experienced practitioners described contemplating and reflecting on thoughts that arose while they practiced.

Fruits of the Practice

Participants described the benefits they experienced from their yoga practice, both personally and professionally, in three areas: personal benefits, counselling presence, and counselling process and techniques.

Personal benefits. Participants experienced the benefits of yoga practice in all aspects of their being—physical, mental, emotional, and experiences of wholeness and integration—and described their interrelationship.

Physically, participants enjoyed the physical activity, yoga postures, and stretching. They reported increased flexibility, upper body strength, and cardiovascular conditioning. Yoga practice provided a mode of activity that many participants experienced differently than other exercise, leaving them feeling refreshed, re-energized, and "light." Participants valued physical activity within an academic program that was primarily cognitively oriented and sedentary.

Emotionally, participants felt more balanced and grounded, which one participant described as having no intense emotions, feeling relaxed, and feeling that they "can handle anything that comes along." Another participant described balance in reference to stress: "It does help with the stress though, for sure … if I didn't have that hour at all, my anxiety level would be much higher, so it keeps you in balance." Participants felt calmer, less quick to anger, more accepting, and described the practice as a means to "help level-off the emotions." Mentally, participants described their minds quietening and found the practice an opportunity to slow down and focus "in my work and in my relationships."

Participants described feeling centred, present, and integrated: "Yoga … was a place where I could do some internal repair work … for me, an introvert, feeling so out there the entire time, it was really nice to come back in and put it all back together again."

One participant described this feeling of integration as a lens through which she sees the world:

> You do your yoga practice … and suddenly you have some kind of different lens that you're looking through … It feels like a more holistic one, that I'm not just operating from one aspect of myself, it's more an integrated aspect.

Integration was also experienced as the resolution of discrepancies between how they felt outwardly and inwardly: "I look calm, but inside I am not at all. So I think yoga has helped me to calm my mind, as well." Yoga practice was described as an opportunity to relax, slow down, and just be.

The participants also described the interrelated nature of these benefits: "I did feel more energetic and 'light' for the rest of the day. A consequence of this state would be better mood throughout the day, which in turn allowed me have a clearer focus on other tasks." One participant described the relationship between the body and the mind and how it affects other aspects of their lives: "The biggest thing I've learned is that body and mind have to work together and when they do, all other aspects of life can follow."

Counselling presence. Participants found yoga valuable in developing counselling presence: being more focused, attentive, and physically relaxed in their counselling sessions. They described the experience and challenge of being fully present in their sessions. Wholeness and integration were also important: bringing their whole selves to counselling sessions and learning to listen and function with the whole body. One participant was surprised to find that after "clearing their mind" in yoga practice, focusing in their counselling sessions happened effortlessly. Participants felt that an enhanced presence increased their counselling effectiveness: "I know that I am more effective when I am grounded and centred and I think [yoga] is a beautiful way to reach that." However, it should also be noted that one participant felt unsure whether the improvements to their experience of counselling was "because of my increased comfort with counselling through coursework, or if it is yoga, or maybe it is both."

Counselling process and techniques. Participants drew parallels between their learning in yoga and their learning in counselling. For example, improvements in their yoga practice provided them with confidence in improving their counselling skills. Just as they were discovering with themselves in their practices, participants described honouring the process of others, appreciated the value of taking things slowly, and saw their role in counselling as being to accompany clients in a process of discovery. The practice also supported participants in becoming aware of a client's body and feelings, and feeling more comfortable with silence.

Nearly every participant planned to share yoga with their clients, particularly breath awareness and techniques to support clients to relax, focus, release tension, bring awareness to and learn from their bodies, and "get through tough situations." One participant described how their practice contributed to their confidence in sharing techniques using the breath: "Because I am more aware of my breath, I am more confident in instructing clients in how to breathe."

DISCUSSION

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore how an ashtanga vinyasa yoga practice was experienced by students in a graduate counselling program. Three major themes emerged through a qualitative analysis of the data: the structure and

support of the yoga course, cultivating present-centred experience, and personal and professional fruits of the practice. The interrelationship between the three themes is also a significant addition to the literature.

The theme of structure and support demonstrated the value of the form and techniques of the yoga practice, a scheduled time in which to practice, and the support of the group and teacher. Supporting the personal health and well-being of students during professional training is a challenge facing many counselling programs (Shapiro et al., 2007). Valente and Marotta (2005) described how the demanding schedule of counsellor training is a pattern that often carries into their counselling practice, which can "create a lifestyle that is imbalanced and consuming" (p. 68). An active, structured, and challenging yoga class, paired with yoga philosophy and personalized instruction, created the space for the same challenges they were facing in counselling to arise, but provided a new way of working with them. McCollum and Gehart (2010) confirmed the importance of structure, reporting that it "helps them to take self-care seriously" (p. 358). By committing to a regular practice, the yoga course created an opportunity to process their experiences as beginning counsellors.

The ashtanga vinyasa practice taught with detailed posture instructions provided the participants with a routine they could practice both individually and as a group. A set sequence of postures allowed participants to build confidence and familiarity with the practice, to practice independently, and to focus on the more subtle aspects of the practice, an observation echoed by Chrisman et al. (2008): "Familiarity [with the qi'gong practice] helped them reduce performance anxiety and focus their minds on their present experience of qigong" (p. 247). Technical and personal support from the instructor aided the participants' confidence and learning, and an introduction to yoga philosophy provided a new context within which the participants could relate to their experience.

Practicing yoga and engaging in this reflective process as a group provided support, friendship, and a sense of community, as well as commitment and accountability to the process. It also provided the participants with a sense that everyone was engaged in a personal learning process. This study also found that the diversity of previous experience with yoga enhanced the experience of the group; instructors can be encouraged by the variation in participants' prior yoga experience.

Given the combination of the intellectual nature of the counselling program and the perceived lack of time for physical activity, this group welcomed a more active practice. Further, yoga provided an embodied complement to the counselling program course work, enhancing the teaching, modelling, support, and supervision of their professors, while providing an opportunity for self-care.

The second theme described by the participants is present-centred experience, encompassing acceptance, awareness and self-knowledge, and letting go. The participants described this present-centred experience in a variety of ways. Newer practitioners found that they were able to focus exclusively on the practice, providing a much-needed break from their full and busy minds; experienced participants described the practice as an opportunity to reflect, cleanse, and

integrate. Throughout the course, participants became more gentle and accepting of themselves, willing to work within their limitations, and more pragmatic about the process of being/working with themselves, demonstrating a shift from an intellectual understanding of change and transformation to an embodied one.

Participants described "letting go" on physical, emotional, and cognitive levels, suggesting both the interconnection of these aspects of experience and the knowledge that practice affects both the tangible and the subtle. Particular to the practice of yoga for counselling students was the experience of working directly with the body. A heightened awareness and self-knowledge supported their ability to implement self-care practices within their counselling sessions. In addition to experiencing the attentiveness and responsiveness described by Christopher and Maris (2010), these participants also gained practical techniques to use between clients. Participants described yoga practice as a means of processing their learning and experience in the counselling program.

Experiencing and working with vulnerability was highlighted in this study, and, although described in Maris's (2009) personal account, working with vulnerability had not previously been discussed in this body of literature. Participants identified yoga as supportive of their ability to work with vulnerability; the ashtanga practice both elicited these feelings and provided a way to work with them. Creating space for participants to experience vulnerability and supporting them to be/work with it enriched their ability to be with the vulnerability of their clients, softening the distinction between counsellor and client, and enhancing the therapeutic process. Acceptance and compassion for self and others are present in the literature (Shapiro et al., 2007; Valente & Marotta, 2005), but in the present study they are related specifically to being with vulnerability. In this study, the main descriptions of vulnerability emerged only within the interview portion of the data collection, suggesting that there are more intimate contributions of yoga practice that may be better revealed through individual, in-depth interviewing than through focus groups.

The fruits of yoga practice were the benefits that drew participants to participate in the research. These benefits were experienced in all aspects of their personal lives: physical, emotional, cognitive, and experiences of wholeness and integration. The physical, emotional, and mental aspects are consistent with those described by counselling students in an MBSR program (Schure et al., 2008). However, this study's participants described experiences of wholeness and integration, whereas the MBSR students described spiritual and interpersonal changes. The participants in this study rarely described the impact of the practice on the interpersonal aspects of their personal lives, but emphasized it in their interactions with clients.

Participants described these fruits of the practice as being related to a heightened awareness of their bodies, emotions, and thoughts, allowing them to be/work with habitual patterns and responses to stress, consistent with the improvements to mental health described by Shapiro et al. (2007). The participants recognized the interconnection between the body, mind, and emotions, and the value of bringing these into alignment, an experience echoing Maris (2009): "Reconnecting with my

body enabled the mind/body split that so characterizes Western culture to quietly and gently begin healing in me" (p. 229). These benefits inspired a confidence that change and opening are possible, and as participants exceeded their own expectations their perceptions and beliefs about themselves also softened. This discussion of softening self-image through cultivating present-centred experience is a unique contribution of this study to the literature and deserves deeper exploration.

The yoga practice also enhanced participants' counselling presence, process, techniques, and self-care. These professional attributes are well documented in the literature, and this study suggests that a yoga practice is another effective way of cultivating these counselling qualities. McCollum and Gehart (2010) focused on mindfulness meditation as a technique to teach therapeutic presence, and the themes of their findings, including being present, centred, slowing down, and gaining greater compassion and acceptance, are consistent with the participants' experiences in this research. As described by Maris (2009), the self-awareness participants developed allowed them to feel more relaxed, patient, grounded, and open in their counselling sessions. Their ability to be attentive to their clients also improved, as thoroughly discussed by Greason and Cashwell (2009) and Grepmair et al. (2007). They were better able to focus in their sessions, were more comfortable with silence, and were better able to listen with their whole selves, as described in Christopher and Maris (2010). They brought their acceptance of themselves and their process to their sessions, and began to see their clients differently as well, consistent with research on mindfulness and empathy (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Greason & Cashwell, 2009).

Participants felt comfortable sharing yoga and breathing techniques with clients, an enthusiasm shared by the students in Schure et al.'s (2008) study. Finally, participants described yoga practice as an opportunity for self-care, a theme that has provided the motivation for most of the research in this field (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Schure et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2007; Valente & Marotta, 2005). As this is the first study to have gathered qualitative data about the practice of yoga, it is evident from these findings that a yoga practice can also serve this role. Further, specific to this study was an emphasis on cultivating body awareness—both the counsellors' and the clients'—and its contribution to their sessions.

A significant contribution of this research has been identifying these three themes, which together may be seen as three interrelated aspects of yoga's potential contribution to counsellor education. The structure and support of the yoga practice provided an opportunity to cultivate present-centred experience, from which the fruits of the practice arose, and in turn provided motivation for continued practice. Identifying these three contributions of the practice provides valuable suggestions for how yoga may enhance counsellor education. Present-centred experience, where the heart of the process occurs, may be omitted when the practice is conceptualized as an intervention, emphasizing only the structure and the fruits of the practice. The findings also suggest the importance of the structure of the practice and the support of a community to intentionally cultivate present-centred experience. And finally, it is suggested that the benefits of

the practice both personally and professionally are not an end, but one part of an ongoing process. Experienced practitioners in this study described yoga and counselling as inseparable, reflecting the conclusion of Valente and Marotta (2005) that psychotherapists with a long-term yoga practice described yoga as a way of life. With time and practice, each experience becomes a situation in which to practice and access present-centred experience. Thus, the opportunity and ability to access present experience is cultivated through a regular formal practice, which develops capacity and serves as a reminder that every experience—professionally with clients, personally with one's self, and in relationship—is also an opportunity to practice the same awareness and attitudes.

Seeing the practice of yoga in this way has implications for the way self-care is regarded. When counselling students begin to see both their personal and professional lives as invitations to be present, self-care becomes proactive—caring for both themselves and others within their relationship—rather than reactive, in which they seek the benefits of the practice to counteract the accumulating stress within the work. It is essential that the heart of yoga practice is not lost in its techniques, but is seen as a commitment to cultivating a present-centred, open-hearted approach to life.

Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The study engaged participants who volunteered to participate, and thus a self-selection bias may limit the data, and the benefits may not be generalizable to the counsellor student population at large. On the other hand, as it is unlikely that a yoga practice would be mandatory for counselling students, these findings may be a good representation of students who would choose to participate in optional yoga courses in a counselling education program. There are also limitations to the self-reporting nature of the research, particularly with the dual role of teacher and researcher: participants may have felt the need to respond positively to the teacher. Consequently, there may be negative aspects of yoga practice that participants experienced but did not feel comfortable sharing with the researcher because of the dual role relationship. Further research is needed to explore this possibility. Finally, this research explored a relatively short time of practice and, together with the flexibility of practice the participants engaged in, indicates that further research is required to determine whether the experience has lasting effects on counselling students and the way they assimilate yoga practice into their personal lives and counselling practice.

However, the positive results of this research suggest important implications for counselling education programs and further research. A yoga practice supported students in a personal process that cultivated empathy and compassion toward themselves and others, thus enriching their learning as counsellors. Incorporating practice as an option into the curriculum communicates the value of this personal work. Engaging in a yoga practice as a group not only made this process financially and practically accessible, as recognized by Valente and Marotta (2005), but

provided a supportive context by deepening friendship and community amongst colleagues and maintained commitment from busy students.

There is a growing demand for mindfulness-based techniques in counselling (Stauffer, 2007). With this growing demand, yoga practices provide a beneficial addition to counsellor education programs. Bringing together the complementary practices and perspectives of contemplative practice and counselling creates the possibility of mutual enrichment. The three aspects of the practice identified in this study—structure and form, present-centred awareness, and the experienced personal and professional benefits—provide a model for considering various contemplative practices and how they are offered to counselling students.

The choice of yoga as a contemplative practice had advantages. First, it contributed a body-centred, kinesthetic, embodied learning to the counselling program. Physical activity was important for the participants, and the emphasis on the body and breath supported participants in developing body-awareness, both personally and professionally. Salmon et al. (2009) described the void of the body not only in individual awareness, but also systemically. Thus, more broadly, a yoga practice highlights the value of the body in counselling and healing. However, offering only a physical form of contemplative practice may be restrictive or unappealing to some students, in which case offering multiple forms of practice may be more inclusive.

As an embodied practice, it is essential for counsellors to maintain a personal practice if they are to share it with their clients (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Thus, proper training for teachers and counsellors is imperative if they intend to share it with others (Stauffer, 2007). Counselling education programs that would like to include contemplative practices as an option in their curriculum require instructors with a deep and committed personal practice. In this study, it was critical that the yoga practice was taught within the context of the experiences of the participants, so the teaching was focused, practical, and resonant with their particular circumstances. Sharing in the focus groups—a positive and constructive environment—led to a deeper processing of the participants' experiences and offered ways of working with their challenges. By continuously guiding participants to see their experience in light of their yoga practice and orienting them to their present experience, the focus groups and interviews were also an opportunity for teaching. It is essential that these contemplative practices are shared in a way that is beyond techniques and actively connected to every aspect of their lives.

Although no participants reported negative consequences of participating in the course, two participants described a sadness and disappointment that it was over. Thus, it may be important to find ways of continuing to offer a structure for practice, likely within the community, when the course is complete.

There are a number of additional directions further research could pursue. It would be instructive to explore stages of counsellor development in light of the challenges participants identified, and the benefits they experienced with the practice. Other interesting topics for further investigation include the softening of self-image with the practice of yoga and its contribution to effective counselling, the mechanisms through which the counsellors' yoga practice directly affected their

clients' emotional regulation, and quantifying the contributions of yoga practice to counsellor education identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study used a qualitative methodology to explore how an 8-week ashtanga vinyasa yoga practice course is experienced by and contributes to the personal and professional life of counselling students in a master of education counselling program. The yoga practice provided a structure and support that was essential to creating an opportunity for cultivating present-centred experience, which offered both personal and professional benefits to the students, supporting their learning and development as counsellors. This study made unique contributions to the growing body of literature on eastern contemplative practices with counselling students, provided suggestions for counsellor education, and invited further exploration in many possible directions.

Note

1 Throughout the findings, the word *practice* is used in reference to yoga practice rather than counselling practice.

References

Baer, R. (2003). Mindfulness training as clinical intervention: A conceptual and empirical review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*, 129–143. doi:10.1093/clipsy/bpg015

Chrisman, J., Christopher, J., & Lichtenstein, S. (2008). Qigong as a mindfulness practice for counseling students: A qualitative study. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 49*, 236–257. doi:10.1177/0022167808327750

Christopher, J. C., Chrisman, J., Trotter-Mathison, M., Schure, M., Dahlen, P., & Christopher, S. (2011). Perceptions of the long-term influence of mindfulness training on counselors and psychotherapists: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 51*, 318–349. doi:10.1177/0022167810381471

Christopher, J., & Maris, J. (2010). Integrating mindfulness as self-care into counselling and psychotherapy training. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 10*, 114–125. doi:10.1080/14733141003750285

Greason, P., & Cashwell, C. (2009). Mindfulness and counseling self-efficacy: The mediating role of attention and empathy. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 49*, 2–19. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2009.tb00083.x

Grepmair, L., Mitterlehner, F., Loew, T., Backler, E., Wolfghardt, R., & Nickel, M. (2007). Promoting mindfulness in psychotherapists in training influences on the treatment results of their patients: A randomized, double-blind, controlled study. *Psychotherapy and Psychodynamics, 76*, 332–338. doi:10.1159/000107560

Jois, P. (1999). *Yoga mala*. New York, NY: North Point Press.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York, NY: Dell.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*, 144–156. doi:10.1093/clipsy/bpg016

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Maris, J. (2009). The impact of a mind/body medicine class on counselor training: A personal journey. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 49*, 229–235. doi:10.1177/0022167809331859

Mason, J. (2006). Mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way. *Qualitative Research, 6*, 9–25. doi:10.1177/1468794106058866

McCollum, E., & Gehart, D. (2010). Using mindfulness meditation to teach beginning therapists therapeutic presence: A qualitative study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 36*, 347–360. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2010.00214.x

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Salmon, P., Lush, E., Jablonski, M., & Sephton, S. (2009). Yoga and mindfulness: Clinical aspects of an ancient mind/body practice. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 16*, 59–72. doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2008.07.002

Schure, M., Christopher, J., & Christopher, S. (2008). Mind-body medicine and the art of self care: Teaching mindfulness to counseling students through yoga, meditation and qigong. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 86*, 47–86. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00625.x

Shapiro, S., Aston., J., Bishop, S., & Cordova, M. (2005). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for health care professionals: Results from a randomized trial. *International Journal of Stress Management, 12*, 164–176. doi:10.1037/1072-5245.12.2.164

Shapiro, S., Brown, K., & Astin, J. (2008). *Towards the integration of meditation into higher education: A review of research*. Northampton, MA: The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Retrieved from http://www.contemplativemind.org/files/MedandHigherEd.pdf

Shapiro, S., Brown, K., & Beigel, G. (2007). Teaching self-care to caregivers: Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on the mental health of therapists in training. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 1*, 105–115. doi:10.1037/1931-3918.1.2.105

Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Astin, J., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 62*, 373–386. doi:10.1002/jclp.20237

Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.

Stauffer, M. (2007). *Mindfulness in counselling and psychotherapy: A literature review and qualitative investigation of mindfulness competencies* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1957/7609/?sequence=1

Valente, V., & Marotta, A. (2005). The impact of yoga on the professional and personal life of the psychotherapist. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 27*, 65–80. doi:10.1007/s10591-004-1971-4

Wolf, C., Mott, E., Thompson, I., Baggs, A., & Puig, A. (2010). *Using yoga to improve wellness: Exploring the effects of a four-week luna yoga program on female counselors and counselors-in-training*. Retrieved from http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/csi.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/Research,_Essay,_Papers,_Articles/Research-G-2009-Wolf_C.pdf

About the Author

Sarah R. Pittoello completed her graduate studies in the Counselling Program, Department of Education, Acadia University. Her main academic interests include yoga and mindfulness, and their contributions to counsellor education and practice. Sarah is currently teaching yoga and meditation, counselling, and working and educating in building sustainable food systems.

Address correspondence to Sarah Pittoello, 12180 Hwy. 1, Hortonville, NS, Canada, B4P 2R3. E-mail: sarah.pittoello@gmail.com