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## **CLOSER TO THE ESSENCE OF YOGA EXPERIENCE**

**Summary:** *Lack of appropriately designed (mixed-method approach that incorporates qualitative methodology) can be the challenge nowadays to researchers. There is often no full awareness of the yoga practitioners' experiences during randomised controlled trials. There are a limited number of qualitative studies per se on psychological experiences of yoga practice. This paper presents an in-depth, qualitative study, analysing responses to focus-group interviews regarding individuals' self-reported experiences and health attitudes during yoga practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three yoga groups in order to collect research data. The analysis indicates extraordinary experiences of yoga practitioners on a various levels their bio-psychosocial-emotional functioning. The results section indicates how yoga influences the complexity and multidimensionality of individuals' health and well being.*

**Key words:** *yoga, yoga experience, phenomenology.*

### **Introduction**

Yoga originates from an ancient knowledge that aims to discover the true meaning of human life. It is estimated that yoga has been developing for four to five thousand years, mainly in Asia.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays it is regarded within complementary and alternative medicine as a form of mind-body medicine.<sup>1</sup> An extensive renaissance of yoga is being observed around the globe, as it offers a philosophical system for approaching health holistically. Yoga creates inner, physical and emotional balance through the use of postures called asanas that are combined with breathing techniques, or pranayama,<sup>2</sup> and are based mainly on isometric muscle contractions.<sup>3</sup> Yoga emphasizes physical and spiritual self control and can be regarded as a way of harmonizing the balance between catabolic and anabolic reactions within the body.<sup>4</sup> The yoga practice is related to high levels of concentration and control of the emotions<sup>5</sup> and the main aim of this kind of activity is self-realization, self-exploration and bliss-consciousness through control of consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Yoga also offers guidance regarding dietary habits and self-regulated lifestyle, as well as general, ethical and moral principles.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the main objective of yoga is the achievement of balanced health and well-being, optimal fitness and increased body resistance to illnesses. From the therapeutic perspective it is important to emphasize that when performed correctly, yoga exercises have no adverse effects.<sup>8-9</sup> Nevertheless, competitiveness and the specific indications and contraindications of different yoga exercises must be respected.<sup>10</sup>

There were several logical reasons for undertaking this study. Firstly, it is hoped that these results will improve understanding of practitioners' psychological perceptions of yoga and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Secondly, the rationale for this survey was to indicate new pathways for future research from the qualitative, psychological perspective. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, yet another logical reason for this survey was to combine the author's previous qualitative studies<sup>11-12</sup> with more empirical data; this study has emerged from the author's earlier research interests, which are summarised in the next paragraph.

The author of this study asserts that yoga exercises promote self-discovery and enhanced well-being in which individuals develop more flexibility and adaptability in their thoughts, emotions and behaviors.<sup>12</sup> The end result is increased mental health awareness, self-organization, willpower and self-

discipline through an increased sense of self control while performing the various body postures during yoga practice.

The aim of this study was to explore the practitioners' experiences and their psychosocial states from an idiographic, phenomenological perspective, dedicated to foregrounding the subjective feelings of the participants. More precisely, this study investigates individuals' cognitive patterns, i.e. thought processes and relaxation, concentration, distraction and physical stimuli, the experience of pain peak performance, the precision and quality of movements, proprioception, body awareness and exploration of own self and social processes and interpersonal relationships, emotional reactions and feelings and health benefits associated with yoga practice.

It has been suggested that qualitative research is appropriate for such studies because it allows unlimited exploration of cognitive and attitudinal perspectives and elicits a wide variety of responses from participants.<sup>14-16</sup>

## **Method**

This qualitative research was conducted in January 2010. Since qualitative design emphasises the analysis of each case there is no requisite number of participants for such a study and hence the sample size is usually small.<sup>17</sup> Three yoga groups with a total of 31 participants (n=31) participated in this survey. All three groups have the same licensed instructor, who has more than ten years' experience of yoga practice. Men and women aged 18–66 in all three groups who were able to complete the interview in English were eligible to participate. The selection criteria included a lower age limit of 18 and at least three years practice of Iyengar yoga in the UK. Prior to the research a formal invitation letter was sent to the instructors and subsequently the author contacted them by telephone for permission to proceed with the study. The groups were approached by the author immediately after their yoga class at their gym, informed about the study and asked whether they would consider taking part in it. The sampling area was London (UK), and it can therefore be suggested that from a qualitative methodological standpoint the groups represented a reasonably homogenous and purposive sample.<sup>17-18</sup> This sampling method was recommended because the interviewees would possess the necessary knowledge and experience of yoga; provide meaningful answers to the questions; and have the capability to reflect and articulate.<sup>18</sup> The author decided to use this sampling method because yoga practitioners are experts in the field of psychological perception in this form of exercise and the intensity of experiences in this particular group was presumed.<sup>19</sup>

The phenomenological approach was chosen because the psychological perceptions of yoga practitioners are dynamic, contextual and subjective, and have been relatively understudied. By focusing in depth on their explicit experiences this study builds upon the author's previous psychological insights to reveal the underlying phenomena. With this approach, truth and meaning emerge through individuals' interactions between multiple constructions of reality, and need to be understood within their situational context.<sup>18,20-24</sup> All names have been changed to protect confidentiality. All the yoga practitioners in all three groups agreed to participate. No financial reward was offered to participants.

## **Data collection**

Prior to the interview the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which collected their demographic data. In order to collect qualitative research data, semi-structured group interviews were held. The semi-structured focus group interview has the characteristics of a discussion as well as of an interview and thus allows interviewees a degree of flexibility. It is currently a popular method of data collection in many fields of applied social research.<sup>17-19</sup> The researcher kept to a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions. Content validity was achieved in the way that the structure and content of the questions were scrutinized and validated by qualitative research staff at the University of East Anglia. Topics included practitioners' wide variety of psychological experiences during yoga

practice. The practitioners were also asked to express and explore in depth their experiences during yoga exercises and were surveyed on emerging topics. All the participants were encouraged to respond to the questions. The interviews were continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which in all three groups was approximately 40 minutes from the start. To maintain accuracy in the data collection, the author digitally recorded the interviews using an iPod. For reliability, field notes and personal observations and feelings were also recorded after each interview. On the day of each interview verbatim transcriptions were uploaded to a computer and transferred from WAV to MP3 format to serve as raw data for the study.

## **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using inductive content and thematic analysis across and within groups. In this process the author generated fifteen code categories directly from the transcript which were subsequently redefined, resulting in nine categories and creating new understandings of yoga practice with varied levels of specificity. The topics were then examined in relation to their literal and theoretical replications.<sup>20</sup> According to Krippendorff (2004) this may ensure formalization and so the findings can be easier to replicate and/or validate.<sup>25</sup> Finally, connections were made between responses where the level of abstraction was comparable. This resulted in a list of themes on similar levels of abstraction and supporting statements regarding psychological and social experiences during yoga practice that can be found in the transcript within the text. Computer software was not used to analyse the data.

## **Results**

It has been suggested that evaluation of the rigor of a qualitative study is based, in part, on the logic of the emerging theory and the clarity with which it sheds light on the phenomenon under study.<sup>22</sup> Therefore to ensure scientific rigor and the reliability of the research outcomes while analysing the research data the author openly and scrupulously adhered to the philosophical perspective of existential phenomenology.<sup>27-30</sup> Also, with the intention of investigating what it is like to be a yoga practitioner, the author only analyzed the participants' psychological experiences as a separate and distinctive phenomenon embodied in the nature of these exercises. Participants' claims regarding other experiences or phenomena were not included in the data analysis. During the analysis, common themes emerged from the responses and the author noticed that from the phenomenological and the naturalistic paradigm perspectives it was relatively simple to categorize the participants' interpretations into similar domains of psychological experience.<sup>31</sup> It is believed that these categorizations reflect the ontological richness of the presented data. The themes that emerged include cognitive patterns, i.e. thought processes and relaxation, concentration, distraction and physical stimuli, the experience of pain peak performance, the precision and quality of movements, proprioception, body awareness and exploration of own self and social processes and interpersonal relationships, emotional reactions and feelings and health benefits associated with yoga practice.

## **Discussion**

This study illustrates the experiences of yoga practitioners at various levels of psychosocial functioning. Specifically, the sample acknowledged the intrinsic power of relaxation, which is essential for them to perform certain asanas: without appropriate muscle relaxation they are not able to execute specific body postures. Some stated that relaxation is the key to essential mind-body balance and a sanctuary in which they could become calm and clear informational noise. A pragmatic ability to relax was also observed, or for some practitioners, relaxation is the aim in itself; they attend classes in order to relax, dispose of stress and gain more flexibility or joint mobility. Others suggested that the ability to relax depends on the relative difficulty of an asana; nonetheless relaxation seems to be embedded in the

practice of yoga. The more they relax the further they can go using conscious thought processes and/or biofeedback. To the author's best knowledge very few similar results are found in the literature. From the quantitative methodological standpoint, however, the positive effects of yoga asanas presented below are to some extent congruent with those of other researchers. For example, improvement in relaxation itself was noticed.<sup>32-33</sup> Relaxation through yoga training is associated with a significant increase of cardiac vagal modulation<sup>34-36</sup> and therefore yoga may enhance stress tolerance<sup>37</sup> and decrease stress levels in practitioners.<sup>35,38-40</sup> Also, yoga-based relaxation techniques enhance cognitive processes<sup>41-42</sup> and improve mental focus, balance, attention<sup>37,39,43</sup> and concentration.<sup>32-33,44-45</sup> The sample experienced a significant increase in attention to the present moment as measured by the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI).<sup>46</sup> They described the psychological and physical effects of relaxation that they experienced, which agree with Danhauer et al.'s (2008) research in which qualitative feedback from participants was predominantly positive and relaxation a common theme.<sup>47</sup> In a study with a similar methodological design, a focus group interview revealed increased relaxation, reduced stress,<sup>14</sup> improved self-knowledge and self-satisfaction.<sup>47</sup> A recent study of students by Supaporn (2009) reflects the main results presented here.<sup>16</sup> For instance, participants' physical gains in this study included improved strength, flexibility, balance, relaxation and concentration, as reported by Supaporn. Other researchers also claim that yoga has a positive effect on flexibility resulting from its effects on balance, stretching, relaxation and strengthening.<sup>15,39,48-50</sup> In the present study the practitioners reported qualitative gains in terms of precision and exactness of movement, quality control mechanisms, individuals' reference points associated with peak performance, and increased mobility and flexibility following yoga classes.

From the social perspective, the present study emphasises the role of group mechanisms or dynamics such as members' social comparison. A group can provide positive inspiration to its members. Clearly there is an emotional-volitional component to attendance of a group. The participants claimed to possess persistence, resistance and internal motivation as well as shared passions, interests and enthusiasm. Yoga can positively and negatively influence the quality and quantity of interpersonal relationships. There was noticeable respect from student to Master, which is congruent to a degree with recent research that found yoga to be beneficial to practitioners' interpersonal relationships,<sup>33</sup> social functioning<sup>13,50-53</sup> and shared group experience.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, the context of the social environment, including interpersonal relationships, community characteristics and discrimination, influences the adoption and maintenance of health behaviours such as yoga practice.<sup>54</sup> These findings cannot be compared or contrasted with the results of the present research due to methodological differences, but evidence suggests that yoga exercises are beneficial to personal well-being.

## Scopes of the research

The quantitative research methods used in the majority of studies mentioned in the discussion section, and the absence of investigation of the psychosocial dimensions of yoga exercises using qualitative methodologies limit the potential value of this study.

Furthermore, to some extent personal subjectivism and interest in the topic may have shaped some of the arguments presented. However, according to Glaser each single case presented within the scope of a paper can dialectically be understood as both individual and universal, theoretically saturated and representative in its data and findings.<sup>55</sup> The discussion has been opened, and these theoretical categories might and should be part of future debate that contributes the existing body of knowledge.

## Conclusions

Relaxation is embedded in the nature of yoga exercises. Practitioners simply cannot execute certain positions without the appropriate muscle relaxation. Some perceive relaxation as an aim in itself; others aim to gain more flexibility or joint mobility. Yoga practitioners possess highly sophisticated body awareness in terms of the quality of their movement control mechanisms and awareness of peak

Posadzki, P. (2011): Closer to the Essence of Yoga Experience. In: P.Nikic, ed. *Proceedings "Yoga – the Light of Microuniverse" of the International Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference "Yoga in Science – Future and Perspectives"*, September 23-24, 2010, Belgrade, Serbia. Belgrade: Yoga Federation of Serbia, p. 112-118

performance. They can be relatively easily distracted from practice, with physical stimuli found to be the main distractors. Informational noise can also shift their thought from yoga practice, although some experience concentration on the exercises with a constant presence within 'here and now'. They aim to harness their selves and deepen the essential balance the body and the mind. From the social-interpersonal perspective, they are able to express and experience a wide variety of positive effects associated with membership of the group.

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