Can Yoga Help Make the World a Better Place? Perceptions from Adult Practitioners

Claire Carroll
ccarrol3@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Commons, Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, and the Social Justice Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations/169

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Education (GSOE) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Studies Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.
Can Yoga Help Make the World a Better Place?

Perspectives from Adult Practitioners

Claire A. Carroll

Graduate School of Education
Lesley University

Ph.D. Educational Studies
Individually Designed Specialization

Approvals
In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Dr. Caroline Heller, Dissertation Committee Chair

Signature: ___________________________ Date

Dr. Meenakshi Chhabra, Dissertation Committee Member

Signature: ___________________________ Date

Dr. David Hansen, Columbia University, Dissertation Committee Member

Signature: ___________________________ Date

Dr. Caroline Heller, Director, Ph.D. Individually Designed Specialization

Signature: ___________________________ Date

Dr. Paul Naso, Director, Ph.D. Educational Studies Department

Signature: ___________________________ Date

Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley, Interim Dean, Graduate School of Education

Signature: ___________________________ Date
Table of Contents

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... 5

List of Tables ............................................................................................................ 5

Abstract ..................................................................................................................... 6

Can Yoga Help Make the World a Better Place? ....................................................... 7

Spiritual Exercises .................................................................................................... 8

Research Interest ...................................................................................................... 10

Areas of Study .......................................................................................................... 11

Important Terms ....................................................................................................... 14

  Adult Education/Adult Learning/Adult Development ................................................. 14
  Cosmopolitanism ..................................................................................................... 15
  Iyengar Yoga ........................................................................................................... 15
  Philosophy ................................................................................................................ 16
  Social Capital ............................................................................................................ 16
  Social Justice ........................................................................................................... 17
  Spiritual Exercises .................................................................................................. 17
  Spirituality ................................................................................................................ 18
  Worldview ............................................................................................................... 19
  Yoga & Yoga Practice .............................................................................................. 19

Methods ...................................................................................................................... 20

  Research Question .................................................................................................. 20

  Research Design ...................................................................................................... 21

Participants ................................................................................................................. 25

  Sample ..................................................................................................................... 25

  Potential Sampling Errors ....................................................................................... 29

  Protection of Human Subjects .................................................................................. 30

Data Collection .......................................................................................................... 31

  Survey ...................................................................................................................... 31

  Interviews ............................................................................................................... 32

  Interview Profiles .................................................................................................... 33

Data Analysis .............................................................................................................. 68

  Quantitative ............................................................................................................. 68

  Qualitative ................................................................................................................ 71

Validity of Study ........................................................................................................ 73
CAN YOGA HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

The Wider World

Community Engagement or Isolation

Family Circles

Cosmopolitanism Theory

Sociocultural Context

Managing Preconceptions

Literature Review

Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Yoga

Contemporary Expressions of Yoga
  From Counterculture to Cultural Phenomenon
  Yoga for Health
  Yoga as Wellness Oriented Lifestyle
  Yoga Studies as Academic Discipline
  Yoga and New Age Thought
  Yoga for Spiritual Growth
  Yoga and Adult Education

Cosmopolitan Aspects of Yoga

Theoretical Mandala

"Around every circle another can be drawn"

Cosmopolitanism’s Roots

Findings

Self-Development and the Balancing Effects of Yoga
  Responding to a disorienting dilemma
  Balancing physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual selves
  Engaging in a continuing and deepening learning process
  Building physical and character strength
  Cultivating self-awareness and acceptance
  Overcoming physical, mental, and psychological obstacles

Family Circles
  Caring for Immediate Family Members
  Widening Circle of Family

Community Engagement or Isolation
  Engaging with Communities
  Exclusionary Cultural Contexts

The Wider World
  Encouraging Myopic, Self-Indulgence
  Increasing Awareness of the Consequences of our Actions
  Acting for the Benefit of Humanity

Observing Universal Truths

Discussion
CAN YOGA HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE? 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using Findings to Create a Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Connections</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Philosophical Systems to Emerge from the Vedas</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Aggregate Responses to Close-Ended Questions</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Interview Guide &amp; Data Coding</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Guide</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised Questions (introduced after second interview was conducted)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Analytic and Procedural Memos</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo #1 - Interview Guide</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo #2 – Preconceptions and Review of Literature</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1 Aggregate Survey Responses to Social Justice Question ........................................... 69
Figure 2 Survey Responses by Group ......................................................................................... 71
Figure 3 The Panchakoshas (five sheaths of human existence) ................................................... 99
Figure 4 Concentric Circles of Cosmopolitan Concern, Attributed to Stoic Philosopher Hierocles .......................................................................................................................... 100
Figure 5 United Nations International Day of Yoga Logo ......................................................... 101
Figure 6 Enhanced Cosmopolitan Maṇḍala ............................................................................. 106
Figure 7 Conceptual Maṇḍala Summarizing Analytic Themes to Emerge from Data ........... 130

List of Tables

Table 1 Epistemology Orientations and Corresponding Methods/Output (Willig, 2013) .......... 22
Table 2 Interviewee Background .................................................................................................. 28
Table 3 Focused Codes to Emerge from Survey Data ................................................................. 72
Table 4 Validation Strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260) ...................................................... 73
Table 5 Characteristics of Indian Philosophy as explained by Radhakrishnan (1957) ........ 83
Table 6 Aspects of Spirituality (Büssing, Ostermann and Matthiessen, (2007) ......................... 93
Table 7 Self-Care Themes ........................................................................................................... 112
Table 8 Yoga and the Wider World Themes ................................................................................. 123
Abstract

Yoga, a vast subject with ancient South Asian roots, is currently enjoying global popularity based largely on its representation as an alternative health care system and/or leisure activity. These depictions often overshadow its potential as a medium to express spiritual development and social justice aims. Extensive studies look at connections between yoga and spirituality, but few delve into how sustained yoga practice might stimulate interest in and action for social change. This study seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly efforts to fill that gap. It analyzes data collected from 107 survey respondents and 15 interviewees through a theoretical lens encompassing elements of cosmopolitanism thought, Western adult education models, and the *panchakoshas* (five sheaths) described in the Taittiriya Upanishad. Findings reveal that practitioners experience yoga for self-development, to support ever-broadening conceptions of family, to engage in multiple communities, and to realize universal truths. To conclude the study, I offer a conceptual framework that represents yoga as a lived philosophy consistent with cosmopolitan ideals to balance disciplined self-development with engaged care for making the world a better place.

*Keywords*: adult education, cosmopolitanism, social change, yoga
Can Yoga Help Make the World a Better Place?

The ringing telephone woke me from a deep sleep. The female caller sounded American, and suspicious, when she asked for Ron. “The switchboard directed your call to the wrong room,” I replied groggily. “I’ll knock on his door to let him know you’re on the phone, OK?” With notable relief in her voice, the caller thanked me for rousing her sleeping boyfriend from the room next door. Ron claimed to be an information officer for the U.S. Agency for International Development, but most of the foreigners in town speculated he was a CIA operative. As he came into my room and cradled the receiver, I wondered if he was chatting with his girlfriend or transmitting intelligence from the phone line in my room.

This exchange took place in the early morning hours on a winter day in 1992 in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, shortly after the dismantling of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of the Bosnian War. I had been living in the Grand Hotel Skopje for about a month, working on an assignment for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to create channels to provide emergency aid to those displaced and impoverished by the war. Ron and other civil servants from various countries, UN officials, journalists, and aid workers checked into the Grand soon after I arrived, but I had been the first foreigner to settle in for an extended stay. With this distinction came the privilege of priority service at the hotel’s reception desk and at the café. On the other hand, the overnight switchboard operator seemed to transfer all English-speaking calls to my room regardless of the hour and whether the call was for me.

Like the interminable winter weather that year, the hotel was drab and gloomy. The city itself sat in a valley frequently enshrouded in smog. Its blocky, Soviet-inspired architecture still bore signs of damage caused by a 1963 earthquake. Even the Vardar River, which runs through
Skopje, appeared grey and listless. When my American coworker and I went out to jog, locals warned that the poor air quality would ruin, rather than bolster, our health.

A long way from the socioeconomically modest enclave of Ozone Park, NY, where I grew up, I landed in Skopje after obtaining a master’s degree in international relations and launching a career in international humanitarian aid that began with an internship with the United Nations Development Program in Bangkok followed by various positions with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in the Middle East, East Africa, and the Balkans. I enjoyed traveling the world, collecting stamps in my passport, and devoting my professional energies to aid work even if I harbored growing doubt about its ability to make the world a better place. My globe hopping slowed down, however, in 1993 when I relocated to Cambridge, MA, and secured a job as director of refugee and immigration services for Catholic Charities/Boston. This is when my consistent study of yoga began.

**Spiritual Exercises**

I’d always been attracted to ascetic disciplines with ancient roots, such as martial arts and yoga. Both systems rest on a long history and feature many branches of practice with distinct characteristics, yet they share the common thread of employing austere disciplines or “spiritual exercises” that might include dietary restrictions, behavioral modifications, physical exercises, meditation, and/or devotion to particular philosophical precepts. According to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Hadot, 2002, p. 276), spiritual exercises support a lived philosophy that enables us to “relearn how to see the world.”

Although I certainly enjoyed the physical aspects of participating in yoga as well as feeling that I was part of a popular cultural movement with global reach ("Two billion people practice yoga," 2016; Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on a
Global Phenomenon, 2013), my deepening practice\(^1\) indeed encouraged me to relearn how I saw the world. I became increasingly interested in understanding how yoga as a spiritual discipline might work to “expand, purify, and illuminate our understanding of self and the world” (Whicher, 1998, p. 54)\(^2\). A central question to emerge from this inquiry -- if and how engagement with yoga contributes to making the world a better place -- led me, at the ripe age of 50, to enroll in the individually designed specialization of Lesley’s doctoral program in education studies.

The doctoral program’s foundational course, Nature of Inquiry with Dr. Caroline Heller, introduced me to modern Western thinkers whose ideas seemed compatible with yoga philosophy, and which spoke directly to the notion of inner wisdom gained through spiritual exercises. For example, novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch (1971) extols the role of art and other intellectual disciplines in lifting the veil that obscures our ability to perceive the world clearly (p. 82). Murdoch further emphasizes the importance of humility and “the disciplined

\(^1\) Like many in today’s world, my introduction to yoga was through the physical postures, or āsana in Sanskrit. While often understood in contemporary circles strictly as fitness-oriented exercises stripped of any spiritual component they might have once been associated with, this representation is incomplete. Many contemporary practitioners (including the participants in this study), experience āsana as a form of tāpas, or heat-generating discipline that burns away physical and mental impurities. We practice āsana in conjunction with other elements of yoga, such as meditation and study of scriptures, in pursuit of some degree of personal transformation, thus linking yoga as a practice to Hadot’s definition of spiritual exercises. My research study employs this definition of “yoga practice.”

\(^2\) Ian Whicher, head of the Religion Department at the University of Manitoba, specializes in Hinduism, Indian philosophy, and the yoga tradition. He is the author of numerous books and on yoga philosophy and practice. In *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana* (1998), Whicher challenges the widely recognized scholarly interpretation that adherence to yoga requires abandonment of embodied and material life. Instead, Whicher argues that the YS advocates for enhanced engagement with the world, a view that is adopted frequently in contemporary yoga circles (and discussed in the analysis chapters of this dissertation).
overcoming of self” in this process (p. 93). Similarly, the Yoga Sūtra\textsuperscript{3} describes the ego as an affliction that causes pain and suffering and shrouds the mind in ignorance. It is to be subjugated through yogic practices (Iyengar, 1996).

In Nature of Inquiry, I also read Evelyn Fox Keller’s (1983) biography of Nobel Prize laureate and botanist/cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock. The book chronicles McClintock’s unconventional work during much of the twentieth century to augment the scientific method with an intuitive “kind of seeing that eventually leads to productive discourse [and] requires the time to look, the patience to hear what the material has to say to you, the openness to let it come to you” (as cited in Fox Keller, 1983, pp. 197-198). McClintock’s words resonated with the yoga philosophy I was learning which positions intuition as superior to reason (Iyengar et al., 2005; Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957), and began to plant the seeds for a doctoral study plan that would look into what I had provisionally termed “outer and inner knowing” or analytic reasoning versus a deeper form of intuitive knowledge. Years later, as I write this dissertation, I notice that McClintock’s approach also reflects grounded theory protocol to let the data tell the story.

Research Interest

Educational philosopher David Hansen’s (2011) work on cosmopolitanism and education, covered in the interdisciplinary seminar that follows Nature of Inquiry, introduced me to a conceptual framework that promised to help me articulate a viable plan of doctoral study to look into how inner knowing or “knowledge acquired through empathy, intuitive hunches, imagination, and meditation (Palmer, 1998, p. xii) might, in turn, support the development of

\textsuperscript{3} Compiled early in the Common Era by a sage named Patañjali, the Yoga Sūtra is widely acknowledged within the modern yoga practitioner community as the authoritative text on yoga philosophy. In 195 verses spread across four chapters, it investigates the behavior of the mind and its attachment to worldly objects as the cause of pain and suffering. It then outlines a number of remedies to facilitate spiritual liberation.
attitudes and behaviors concerned with making the world a better place. According to Hansen (2011), a cosmopolitan orientation balances intellectual, moral, and aesthetic self-transformation with a maturing sense of social responsibility (pp. 21-25). Its lineage can be traced to both Eastern (Confucianism in China and South Asian ideas expressed in the Upaniṣhads) and Western (ancient Greek and Roman thought, as well as the work of Kant) philosophy. Also described as a framework to merge personal ethics and moral behavior to bring meaning to existing ways of life (Appiah, 2006, p. xv; Todd, 2009, p. 27), it seemed that cosmopolitanism could be used as an analytic lens for my research.

**Areas of Study**

I began constructing a literature review on cosmopolitanism to serve as the cornerstone of my Doctoral Study Plan (DSP) and encountered a bewildering array of “cosmopolitanisms,” including political, moral, cultural, and critical cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2006, 2009). I also observed a tendency for authors to use modifiers to create terms such as “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” (Malcomson, 1998), “discrepant cosmopolitanism” (Clifford as cited in Robbins, 1998), “realistic cosmopolitanism” (Beck, 2004), “self-critical cosmopolitanism” (Rabinow as cited in Beck, 2002), “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Ackerman, 1994), “thick or thin cosmopolitanism” (Held, 2010), “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Breckenridge et al., 2002) and “embodied” cosmopolitanism (Hansen, 2014).

After wrestling with the literature review for the better part of a semester, I felt that my understanding of cosmopolitanism was diminishing rather than being enhanced. Instead of gaining insight into how self-knowledge gained through the spiritual exercises associated with yoga might contribute to a cosmopolitan outlook that informs one’s attitudes and actions in the world, my review of the literature turned up writings on transnational governance and
international law (Dallmayr, 2003; Held, 2010; Kleingeld, 2012), arguments for multicultural civic education (Nussbaum, 1997a), and sociocultural concerns (Beck, 2002, 2004; Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delany, 2006, 2009; Hannerz, 1990; Soysal, 2010). While all focus on important aspects of cosmopolitanism, only the sociocultural angle was within my scope of study, and even that seemed too broad to delve into during the initial stage of my work. I therefore determined that it would be more productive to refocus on yoga, my primary research interest, and return to cosmopolitanism at a later point in my studies. In the meantime, I declared the three areas of study required for my DSP as: (1) the historical and philosophical foundations of yoga, (2) contemporary expressions of yoga, and (3) adult learning and development to understand what motivates adults to seek continuing education.

The literature review submitted with my DSP looked at where yoga resides within India’s rich historical and cultural landscape. It traced yoga’s origins, as well as that of eight other systems of philosophy to the Vedas⁴, a vast collection of hymns and instructions for ritualistic worship compiled between 2500-600 BCE (see Appendix A). Early Vedic practices involved sacrificial rites commissioned by affluent sponsors seeking material wealth. It wasn’t until the later Vedic period, when the Upaniṣhads⁵ were compiled, that the emphasis in the texts shifted toward spiritual purification. According to Indologist Patrick Olivelle (1996), the word upaniṣhad means to “sit near.” It also came to mean “secret knowledge,” suggesting that the teachings were available only to erudite pupils who had access to scholars familiar with the texts.

The Upaniṣhads contain the foundational ideas of yogic philosophy, which were later

---

⁴ Considered śruti (“to hear”) or revealed texts, the Vedas were supposedly taught at the beginning of creation by the gods to sages and passed on through oral tradition.

⁵ Likely written over a period of about 600 years, in various regions of the subcontinent, and by different authors, the Upaniṣhads are a subsection of the Vedas.
codified in the Yoga Sūtra (Bryant, 2009; Chatterjee & Datta, 1968). Both texts have little to say about the physical postures associated with yoga today. Instead, the development of yoga postures is linked to hāṭha yoga traditions whose earliest records date to 1100 CE (Mallinson, 2012). I investigated the connection between ancient and medieval hāṭha yoga traditions and “modern postural yoga,” a term coined by religious studies scholar Elizabeth De Michelis (2004), in the Qualifying Paper (QP) I prepared to move into the third and final phase of the doctoral program. This work enhanced my understanding of how contemporary Indian yoga gurus, Western fitness and self-improvement enthusiasts, and New Age thought helped to shape perceptions of modern yoga as a regimen for health and wellbeing, with the potential to cultivate spiritual fulfillment for the individual practitioner. It also shed light on provocative claims by the United Nations, the Indian government, and influential media outlets that yoga is a universal practice available to all people equally, as well as a means to contribute to global peace and harmony (Couturier, n.d.; International Day of Yoga, 21 June, n.d.; Joseph, 2015). At face value, these assertions are encouraging, but they require further scrutiny.

I identified several strands in literature on adult learning and development, my third area of study, to support a budding thesis that adults pursue yoga education in search of something more profound than recreation or to address minor health concerns. For example, adult education experts Leona English (2005; 2003) and Elizabeth Tisdell (1999, 2008) indicate that the desire to foster inner reflection, identify one’s life’s work, and contribute to social justice in the world often provide the impetus for adults to pursue formal or informal continuing education. In addition, philosophers Lou Marinoff and Daisaku Ikeda advocate for people to consider adopting a guiding philosophy to help navigate increasingly complex and challenging world conditions. These findings align with my own experience that yoga can serve many purposes in one’s life –
including supporting physical and mental health, providing social community, aiding spiritual study and, perhaps most importantly representing, “an unostentatious philosophy that sees life as it truly is” (Marinoff & Ikeda, 2012, p. 122).

**Important Terms**

*Adult Education/Adult Learning/Adult Development*

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably and defy easy definition. First and foremost is the challenge of identifying what it means to be an “adult.” Although it doesn’t take into account all possible situations within a household or a culture, in the United States people are generally considered adults when they are responsible for themselves and others (Clark & Caffarella, 1999, p. 4). Adult education experts Sharan B. Merriam and Ralph G. Brockett define adult education as “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults” (Smith, 2019). The concept of adult education as a discrete field of inquiry in the United States is generally attributed to Eduard Lindeman, a contemporary of John Dewey, who published *The Meaning of Adult Education* in 1926. Both Lindeman and Dewey were interested in the emancipatory effects of adult education with respect to fomenting social change (Smith, 2020).

Often referred to as andragogy, a term first used by Lindeman and popularized in the 1960s by educator Malcom Knowles, adult learning refers to how adults learn in contrast to pedagogical methods associated with educating children. Several prominent theories on adult learn are discussed in the literature review.

Adult development theory seeks to understand the process of change over the course of an adult’s lifespan. A relatively young academic field, Caffarella and Clark (1999) cite a typology that organizes theoretical work into the biological, psychological, and sociocultural
perspectives. As work in the field continues, these typologies are melding into an integrated perspective that views adult development as a function of a complexity of factors, including the connections among mind, body and culture. In particular, the social and cultural aspects of adult life have received growing attention in the literature (pp.97-98).

**Cosmopolitanism**

A topic of philosophical consideration in Western thought since the time of the Greeks and the Romans, cosmopolitanism is a notion that defies simple definition and generates much debate. This paper makes a case for cosmopolitanism as a worldview constructed from a disciplined process of self-development that inspires concern for making the world a better place. This definition is influenced heavily by Hansen (2011), who describes cosmopolitanism as a prism that changes how the practitioner sees not only themselves but also how they view the world (p. 3) and “an orientation in which people learn to balance reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known” (p. 1).

**Iyengar Yoga**

Iyengar Yoga refers to a method developed by recently deceased Indian yoga master, B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar established the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI), named after his wife, in 1974. RIMYI is referred to the Iyengar Institute or, simply, the Institute in this study. The Iyengar method is known, among other things, for its emphasis on integrating the study of yoga philosophy with postural practice. Since my training is almost entirely in this method, I tend to view yoga through this lens even though there are many other modes of exploration.

B.K.S. Iyengar’s daughter, Geeta, was a principal teacher at the Institute until her death at the age of 74 in 2018. Iyengar’s only son, Prashant, Iyengar, who turned 70 in 2019, also has
dedicated his life to sharing his father’s work. He is published widely in India and is respected worldwide for his knowledge of yogic philosophy as laid out in ancient texts as well as for his intellectual musings on modern yoga. Iyengar’s grand-daughter, Abhijata, was trained to carry on the lineage and currently teaches at the Institute and abroad. She is in her mid-30s.

**Philosophy**

According to Aristotle, philosophy has a practical dimension as well as a theoretical one (as cited in Hadot, 2002; Marinoff & Ikeda, 2012). A lived philosophy, crafted through continuous practice of spiritual exercises, helps cultivate the inner strength needed “to navigate the turbulence of a rapidly changing society (Marinoff & Ikeda, 2012, p. 122). This study is based on the assumption that the spiritual exercises associated with yoga cultivate a form of lived philosophy.

**Social Capital**

Defined as a set of social norms, values, beliefs, trust, obligations, and information that fosters cooperation and benefits for a network of people, social capital can be considered a marker of prestige and power (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Current theories of social capital are attributed to individual contributions from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, American sociologist James Coleman, and political scientist Robert Putnam. I first came across the term in one of the two required interdisciplinary seminars of the doctoral program at Lesley, when I read education expert Richard Rothstein’s work on the education gap in the United States. Rothstein notes that social class is an important determinant in an individual’s predisposition toward and access to certain forms of social capital which, in turn, impacts access to and people’s abilities to benefit from educational opportunities (2004). This led to me consider contemporary expressions of yoga as a form of social capital.
Social Justice

According to renowned economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (2009), the concept of social justice has been discussed throughout the ages (p. 5). Its defining principles vary depending on the lives and circumstances of the people involved (p. xii). Contemporary Western scholarship on the subject is often traced to moral and political philosopher John Rawls’ (1971) work on justice as fairness, followed by philosopher Robert Nozick’s well known criticism of Rawls, and a considerable number of social justice theories to emerge thereafter (Miller, 1991). Educator Maxine Greene (in Ayers et al., 1998) writes that with Rawls’ work “it was as if justice had taken on a new life” (p. xxxv), and describes social justice as encompassing a notion of how people should live together, with equitable distribution of goods, services, and opportunities. Sen suggests that social justice might be understood as the removal of injustice instead of an effort to establish a perfect balance of justice (p. ix).

Grounded theory expert Kathy Charmaz’s (2014) definition of social justice as thinking about what it means to be human, what national and world citizenship mean, and how to contribute to good societies and a better world (p. 326) reflects the cosmopolitan orientation that this research project is concerned with.

Spiritual Exercises

Yogic texts, notably the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali and the Bhagavad Gītā, spell out a variety of physical and mental disciplines intended to liberate adherents from the causes of pain and suffering. These disciplines include dietary restrictions, behavioral modifications, physical

---

6 Believed to have been written somewhere between 400 BCE and 200 CE, the Bhagavad Gītā is a poem inserted in the larger epic work, the Mahabharata. In the Gītā, the god Krishna, disguised as a chariot driver, explains the paths of yoga to Arjuna, a warrior. The narrative unfolds at the threshold of a battle between two warring clans (Mitchell, 2000).
exercises, meditation, and/or devotion to particular philosophical precepts. According to French philosopher Pierre Hadot (2002), these “spiritual exercises” represents a practical, or lived, philosophy that paves the way for inner wisdom to emerge (p. 4). In my dissertation, I will refer to yoga practices as spiritual exercises that support a lived philosophy for “relearning how to see the world” (Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Hadot, 2002, p. 276).

**Spirituality**

Spirituality is an “undefined phenomenon,” open to a variety of definitions and interpretations. It can refer to an academic field of study, serve as a synonym for affiliation with a religious tradition(s), and/or encompass everything that pertains to how we live in relation to deeply held values and beliefs regarding divine transcendence. Similar to Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan’s (1957) observations about Vedic philosophy, Presbyterian pastor and author Marjorie Thompson (2014) notes that the desire for meaning and purpose through religious observance is an innate human characteristic.

Büssing⁷, Ostermann and Matthiessen (2012; 2007) define spirituality as a search for meaning and purpose in life, awareness of a divine being, and connection with others and nature (p. 284), while Thompson (2014) classifies it as a practice that “nurtures inner life and addresses social reality” (p.15). Thompson urges seekers to adopt life patterns, habits, and commitments – or spiritual discipline -- to cultivate this broad and inclusive view of spirituality. Referred to as *habitus* by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* (written between 1265–1274), spirituality involves the development of knowledge, bodily practices, spiritual training, and a way of being

---

⁷ Arndt Büssing is professor for Quality of Life, Spirituality and Coping at the University of Witten/Herdecke, Germany. He is the principal researcher for a number of studies that look at expressions of spirituality.
in the world (as cited in Kwok, 2010), much akin to spiritual practices of yoga discussed in this paper.

In her work on spirituality and adult education, Elizabeth Tisdell (2008) notes that spirituality means different things to different people. According to Tisdell, the use of the term spirituality in contemporary literature refers to an individual’s personal experience with the sacred and can be experienced anywhere. She contrasts this depiction with religion, which typically refers to organized communities of faith that follow official creeds and codes of behavior.

**Worldview**

Dictionary.com’s definition of the word “worldview” is straightforward and unsurprising: a “particular philosophy of life or conception of the world.” An individual’s worldview inevitably is shaped by their native culture and reinforced by powerful external forces, such as the way the media frames social issues. However, when adults recognize that their indigenous worldview is not shared universally, they are often motivated to seek continuing education to enhance their understanding of the world and their place in it (Hanvey, 1982).

**Yoga & Yoga Practice**

The word yoga can be used to refer to a wide range of practices and philosophical outlooks. While sometimes understood in contemporary circles strictly as fitness-oriented exercises stripped of any spiritual component they might have once been associated with, this representation is incomplete. Many contemporary practitioners (including the participants in this study) experience postural practice (āsana) as a form of tāpas, or heat-generating discipline that burns away physical and mental impurities. Āsana is typically practiced in conjunction with
other elements of yoga, such as meditation and study of scriptures, in pursuit of some degree of personal transformation, thus linking it to Hadot’s definition of spiritual exercises.

Methods

Research Question

My research question (RQ) has gone through a number of permutations throughout my years of doctoral study. I had learned in a research methods course that RQs are intended to frame investigations to look for cause and effect, relationship between variables, or study processes (Dr. Helen Haste, social psychologist and visiting professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, personal communication, Spring 2016). Despite several attempts to craft an RQ to capture the potential relationship between an individual’s yoga practice and their worldview, the various versions of my RQ, including that submitted with my Dissertation Proposal (DP), insinuated a causal relationship. Nevertheless, I entered the data collection stage of this project with the RQ, “Do adult yoga practitioners, over time, come to view yoga as a guiding philosophy to (re)shape their view of the world, especially around social justice issues?”

Analyzing the first round of data I collected via an online survey helped to sharpen my understanding of how the existing RQ not only suggested cause and effect but also didn’t quite match my research plan to look into how yoga might be instrumental in prompting practitioners to relearn how they see the world (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Hadot, 2002, p. 276) or, as Hansen (2011) notes, serve as a prism that changes not only how the practitioner sees themselves but also how they view the world (p. 3). This realization prompted me to restate my RQ to the straightforward query, “Can yoga help to make the world a better place: Perspectives from adult practitioners.”
Research Design

This research study is primarily qualitative in nature, although I have used basic quantitative tools to provide an analytic overview of the data collected. I administered an online survey to build a sample population and to collect initial data from 107 respondents. I then selected 15 survey respondents who volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. I employed a medley of realist, constructivist, and phenomenological tools to extract meaning from interview data as well as from one open-ended question on the survey.

According to mixed method qualitative research experts Creswell and Poth (2018, pp. 16-36), qualitative research projects are built on a foundation of researcher reflexivity, philosophical assumptions, and interpretive frameworks. I discuss the personal perspectives and experiences I bring to the study throughout this report, notably in the Sociocultural Context and Managing Preconceptions sections included within this Methods chapter. While engaging in the self-examination that reflexivity requires is a challenging, and ongoing, process that exposes how social conditioning generates deeply embedded assumptions about the world that the researcher must unpack and examine, it is a process that I’m familiar with from my decades of yoga study. Indeed, yoga practices train adherents to recognize and create a healthy distance between our minds and the external influences that cloud our ability to see clearly. So, although cultivating reflexivity is difficult, I felt that I had the skills and background to engage in the process from a qualitative research perspective.

---

8 My dissertation proposal indicated that I would conduct 12 semi-structured interviews. At the advice of one of my committee members, I scheduled an “extra” three interviews to account for the likelihood that some sessions might not reap fruitful responses to all questions. While some interviews did indeed generate richer data than others, my findings and analysis include at least some data from each of the 15 interviews. See Sample section below for explanation of how the 15 interview respondents were selected.
Conversely, throughout the years of my doctoral study, I struggled with identifying the philosophical assumptions and interpretive framework best suited to my research topic. Creswell and Poth (2018) delineate four categories of philosophical assumptions: ontological, regarding the nature of reality; epistemological, concerning the construction of knowledge; the role of values (axiological assumptions); and the methodological process to be used in the study’s design. They note that a study’s philosophical assumptions are generally expressed within a compatible interpretive framework, such as postpositivist, social constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic. Research methodologist Carla Willig (2013) covers similar terrain but focuses primarily on epistemology and methodology, as presented in Table 1 below. Willig (2013) states that a study’s methodology should be selected based on its ability to address the research question. This at once clarifies and complicates matters for a novice researcher. For example, each of the following epistemological orientations could reap meaningful insight into my research question:

**Table 1 Epistemology Orientations and Corresponding Methods/Output (Willig, 2013)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemological Orientation</th>
<th>Corresponding Methods</th>
<th>Anticipated Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Realist</td>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Themes emerge from interviews to inform theory construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Constructivist</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>Study of discursive patterns reveal how interviewees construct meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Data helps to draw conclusions about how interviewees experience topic under review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given that contemporary yoga is typically represented as a body-oriented practice and that this is the way that 100% of the interviewees in my study were introduced to yoga, a phenomenological approach could be in order. In our interviews, participants described how they feel in the moment when they are engaging in yoga and then interpreted how these feelings (often labeled as “spacious,” “sane,” or “aware”) encourage them to act in certain ways. This form of reporting helped me, as the researcher, draw conclusions about how interviewees experience yoga as a phenomenon, thus arguing in favor of a phenomenological approach.

At one point in my doctoral study I became enamored with discourse analysis and thought that I might use this particular research method to gain insight into how discursive patterns reveal how informants construct meaning around the phenomenon being studied. Although I eventually rejected this social constructivist approach, I remain intrigued by studying how people construct meaning through language and reflection. For example, my interview transcripts could be seen as a form or narrative through which interviewees and I co-constructed accounts of how they make meaning from their engagement with yoga.

Although I am inclined to view meaning-making as a socially constructed process, I also recognize that my personal “tell it like it is,” nature conforms with realist epistemology. Grounded Theory (GT), a realist approach (Willig, 2013), thus appealed to me. While a discrete research approach, GT also seems to encompass elements of phenomenology and social constructivism. In fact, probably in an effort to assuage my angst around methodology, Dr. Caroline Heller once stated that since all forms of qualitative inquiry seeks to extract meaning from data, all qualitative inquiry could be considered grounded theory (personal communication, 2018).
Additionally, GT seeks to fill gaps in prevailing research (Chun Tie et al., 2019), and my study aims to enhance existing scholarship on how the benefits individuals derive from yoga practice might extend beyond practitioners’ individual experience and ripple out into the world. (A number of studies look into the former but not the latter (Büssing, Khalsa, et al., 2012; Büssing et al., 2007; Park et al., 2015; Park et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2014)). Learning about the constructivist turn to GT developed by Kathy Charmaz (2014) sealed the deal in making the decision to use GT as the central analytical frame and process for my study. Constructivist GT allowed me to engage in a process of shared meaning-making with my respondents, some of whom admitted to never really thinking much about the impact of yoga in the world beyond their own individual experience.

Developed by sociologists Bernard Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, grounded theory (GT) research seeks to generate a general explanation, or theory, of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of research participants. Over time Glaser and Strauss’ views diverged, resulting in two distinct epistemological approaches. Associated with Glaser, the objectivist GT approach harkens back to the positivistic idea that a single reality exists and it’s the researcher’s job to use data to explain a process or predict an outcome based in that reality. Strauss, on the other hand, embraced the principles of symbolic interactionism and advocated GT methods to study how people derive meaning through social interactions. A third, constructivist approach is attributed to Kathy Charmaz, also a sociologist and former student of both Glaser and Strauss. The constructivist approach acknowledges the researcher’s role in co-constructing meaning with study participants. Unlike Glaser who focused on the “why” of a phenomenon, constructivist GT looks at the “what” and “how” to contextualize the research environment (Birks et al., 2019; Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Chun Tie et al., 2019).
Participants

Upwards of 37 million people in the United States identify as yoga enthusiasts ("Yoga in America Study," 2016), and as many as two billion practice worldwide ("Two billion people practice yoga," 2016). Yoga seems to be everywhere these days, from K-12 classrooms in the United States (Rojas, 2020; Schultz, 2013) to rural communities in China (Chen & Wee, 2018). To reflect the current worldwide fascination with yoga, my outreach efforts emphasized the desire to collect data from respondents representing a wide range of geographic and sociocultural backgrounds. Of the 107 respondents to the above-mentioned online survey, 37 individuals (34.6%) reported being natives of 17 countries outside the United States. The remaining 65.4% of respondents identified as U.S. nationals.

Sample

To develop a sample population, I invited people who self-identify as yoga practitioners to participate in the above-mentioned survey. I posted a link to the survey on social media and also emailed it to a little over 100 contacts in my personal yoga practitioner database. I encouraged recipients to share the link with their own yoga-oriented networks, thus encouraging some degree of snowball sampling. Seventy percent of the 107 survey respondents (75 individuals) indicated willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews to expand on their survey responses. I then employed purposive sampling to build an interview population.

---

9 Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Italy, Israel, Latvia, Malaysia, Morocco, Netherlands, South Africa, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Wales (although Wales is considered part of the U.K., one respondent listed their country of origin and residence as Wales, not U.K.).

10 Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that uses members of the population of interest to identify other members of the population (Adler & Clark, 2015).

11 Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that allows researchers to select participants that will facilitate the research. Grounded theory studies typically use
Initially, I targeted prospective interviewees with 20+ years of yoga experience, an international background and, to manage the potential for bias to creep into the study, I reached out to prospective candidates with whom I’m not personally acquainted and who do not practice the Iyengar method of yoga\(^\text{12}\) exclusively. I also tagged survey respondents who offered what I considered to be especially insightful or intriguing responses to the open-ended survey question.

Of the first round of 15 people I contacted to schedule interviews, only half responded. Although I specifically targeted people I was not acquainted with, only one person from this sub-group (an Iyengar practitioner from Israel) responded to my initial request for an interview and ultimately did not follow through to set a time and date. Those who did respond to my query are mostly “known associates,” with whom I study and/or teach yoga, and who possess at least one of the desired characteristics. For example, respondent B.C. has more than 20 years of yoga experience and practices a variety of styles of yoga but has little international background, while G.A.D., a dedicated student of Iyengar yoga, has only 6-10 years of experience but is an Indian national living/working in the Boston area whose yoga journey began during a college internship in Brazil. Both B.C. and G.A.D. are my yoga students.

Before I departed in late December 2019 for my annual trip to study yoga at the Iyengar Institute in India, I had confirmed appointments to interview six people upon my return in late January/early February 2020. I intended to recruit more people and conduct interviews while in Pune. Indeed, the day I arrived I asked my landlord, R.T., a long-time Iyengar practitioner, to

\(^{12}\) Iyengar Yoga refers to a method developed by recently deceased Indian yoga master, B.K.S. Iyengar. It is known, among other things, for its emphasis on integrating the study of yoga philosophy with postural practice. Since my training is almost entirely in this method, I tend to view yoga through this lens even though there are many other modes of exploration.
complete the survey and sit for an interview. He graciously obliged. I next secured an interview with L.P.M. from Spain, who I met in the practice hall at the Iyengar Institute. A medical anthropologist and field researcher by training, she was quite intrigued with my project. An American woman from Maine, a Finnish national living in Germany, and an Australian woman declined to be interviewed, but I was able conduct interviews with an American acquaintance from Vermont and a local, Indian teacher at the Institute. I also scheduled a few more interviews with people from home, to be conducted upon my return. I ended up with an interview sample of 11 women, 4 men; 9 U.S. citizens, three from India, one from Spain, one from the U.K., and one with roots in Taiwan and Canada. I’ve been acquainted with all but three interviewees for some time; I’ve known two interviewees, J.X.C. and N.R., for close to 20 years. In addition, only eight of the interviewees claimed more than 20 years of yoga experience. Three reported 11-16 years, one claimed 11-15 years, and three respondents cited 6-10 years of involvement with yoga. Eleven interviewees (74% of sample) consider themselves dedicated solely to the Iyengar method. See Table 2 for interviewees’ backgrounds.

The four non-Iyengar study participants come from varied yoga backgrounds. D.S.\textsuperscript{13} is based in the U.K. and has studied both Iyengar yoga and the Asthanga method, as developed by Indian yoga pioneer Patthabi Jois (1915-2009). A former foreign correspondent, D.S. has a master’s degree in yoga studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and teaches courses on yoga philosophy. He is writing a “practical guidebook to yoga philosophy,” soon to be published by North Point Press. D.S. reported 16-20 years of yoga experience.

\textsuperscript{13} From this point forth, I will use initials to refer to specific study participants.
With 6-10 years of yoga experience, respondent E.F. taught English in Chicago public schools before devoting herself to yoga. In addition to offering postural-based classes that, according to her website, are “physically challenging but allow time and space to pause, find stillness, and reflect on the many facets of a yoga practice,” E.F. also is a certified Ayurvedic Health Counselor.

B.C. has been practicing yoga since the 1980s and is certified to teach in the Kripalu method, although he does not teach public classes at this time. B.C. is an accomplished photographer, painter, and is learning to play the cello. He has been attending one of my postural-based yoga classes for about three years, and views yoga as one of several important disciplines that help him to “live life fully.”

J.S.S. was a student in a “Yoga Basics” class I taught at an upscale health club in Boston. I met her there about ten years ago, but she had been taking classes elsewhere for 4-5 years before that. She practices various methods of postural yoga and continued even throughout a round of successful treatment for breast cancer. J.S.S. obtained an Ed.D. in 2001 in adult developmental psychology from Boston University’s School of Education.

More complete interviewee profiles are provided in the Data Analysis section below, along with bits of background interwoven as relevant throughout this study. Here is an overview of all interviewees’ background:

Table 2 Interviewee Background

---

14 Ayurveda, “the science of life,” originated in India and stems from the same ancient Vedic culture that spawned yoga. It is a natural healing system that recommends diet, daily practices, herbal remedies, and various forms of bodywork (including āsana) to help balance one’s system (https://www.ayurveda.com/resources/articles/ayurveda-a-brief-introduction-and-guide).
Initials  Age  Native Country  Professional Background

6-10 years of yoga experience
B.M.  60s  U.S.A.  Retired; published poet
E.F.  30s  U.S.A.  Former high school English teacher; yoga teacher
G.A.D.  20s  India  I.T.

11-15 years of yoga experience
J.S.S.  60s  U.S.A.  Ed.D adult psychology; self-employed

16-20 years of yoga experience
D.S.  30-40s  U.K.  Foreign correspondent; yoga philosophy teacher
J.S.  60s  U.S.A.  Screenwriter; retired professor; yoga teacher
L.P.M.  30s  Spain  Medical anthropologist; yoga teacher & bodyworker

More than 20 years of yoga experience
B.C.  50s  U.S.A.  Commercial photographer; artist & yoga teacher
G.D.  50s  India  Yoga teacher
J.X.C.  40s  Taiwan, Canada, U.S.A.  Epidemiologist; yoga teacher
K.D.  50s  U.S.A.  Yoga teacher & studio owner
L.J.  50s  U.S.A.  Social scientist; yoga teacher & writer
N.R.  50s  U.S.A.  GIS engineer; yoga teacher
R.T.  60s  India  Engineer; landlord
S.G.  50-60s  U.S.A.  Influential person in Quaker community; medical rescue team member for Outward Bound

Potential Sampling Errors

Purposive, non-probability sampling is vulnerable to selection bias (Adler & Clark, 2015, p. 108; Glesne, 2006, p. 37). While some degree of selection bias is inherent in this type of sampling since respondents must have the experience or knowledge to effectively address the research question, this approach also opens the door for selecting respondents who are likely to answer questions in the way the researcher anticipates. I tried to guard against this, as described above, by securing interviews with volunteers I did not know well. When this approach did not pan out, I reverted to scheduling interviews with yoga practitioners with whom I have pre-existing relationships ranging from basic acquaintance to long-time colleague/friend. I worried,
particular with interviewees J.X.C. and N.R. who I’ve known for close to 20 years each, that our interaction during the interviews might be too casual or rife with shared assumptions. I was likewise concerned that interviewees who consider me their yoga teacher might be inclined to give the answers they thought I was looking for rather than their unadulterated perspectives. However, I was pleasantly surprised within each interview by what I observed to be sincere efforts on the part of all interviewees to engage with interview questions thoughtfully and honestly. I learned new things about some of the respondents I’ve known for a while and am grateful for their generosity in sharing deeply personal information to support my research efforts.

The facts that 73% of my interview pool are exclusively aligned with the Iyengar method of yoga, and that the majority of respondents are from the United States, could contribute to sample coverage errors (Adler & Clark, 2015, p. 108) and raise the question of whether the study’s findings would have differed dramatically if interviewees had represented a wider array of yoga styles or types of practice. In addition, 100% of interview respondents have access to yoga as social capital as discussed in the section of this report on managing preconceptions. A more varied interview sample might have generated different findings, as discussed in the limitations section of this paper’s conclusion.

Protection of Human Subjects

Data collection for this project posed little to no risk for participants, although there was a small chance for emotions to be triggered and/or sensitive material around potential cultural appropriation of yoga-oriented symbols, traditions, and language to arise. Invitations to

---

15 In the past decade, awareness has increased with respect to a tendency within U.S.-based yoga communities for yoga-oriented cultural icons (e.g., statues of Hindu gods or use of the OM symbol) or spiritual practices (such as chanting sacred hymns) to be inappropriately
complete the online survey indicated that participation was voluntary and could be canceled at any time by exiting the survey. Respondents had the option to remain anonymous, although I needed to collect their email address if they were interested in being interviewed. Interviewees signed consent forms. Voice recordings and transcripts of the interviews are currently stored on Temi, an online automated transcription service. The files will be deleted once this project is completed. The Institutional Review Board approved the project on December 13, 2019 (IRB Number: 19/20-012).

Data Collection

Survey

The online survey was set up as a Google form, which automatically collated and quantified responses to closed-ended questions on respondents’ country of residence, country of origin, years of yoga experience, and whether they feel that their yoga practice has influenced their views on social justice issues such as wealth distribution, educational opportunity, immigration, and environmental concerns (see Appendix B for summary of responses). The survey also contained one open-ended question that invited respondents to briefly elaborate on the social justice question. The purpose of the closed- and open-ended social justice questions was to get at if and how respondents view the involvement with yoga as instilling a cosmopolitan orientation, or concern for the world beyond their own individual experience. Because effective survey questions should be specific and concise (Adler & Clark, 2015, pp. 230-232) and also because I didn’t think that asking directly about “cosmopolitanism” in an online survey would

integrated into yoga settings. Appropriation can also be deliberate and/or driven by market forces, such as when entrepreneurial “gurus” employ cultural or religious symbols to promote their yoga brands (Jain, 2016).
generate useful data given the broadness of the term, I therefore used wealth, education, migration, and the environment as proxies for a cosmopolitan outlook.

**Interviews**

Appendix B shows the evolution of my interview guide. It also reveals my inexperience as an interviewer. After the first few interviews, I found that my questions focused heavily on respondents’ individual experience with yoga at the expense of probing into if and how they perceive their individual experience influencing their attitudes and behaviors about yoga in the world. In an approach recommended by Charmaz (2014, pp. 62-68), I wrote a memo to help articulate the problems I observed in this approach, and to rework the interview guide to strike a better balance between respondents’ personal experience with yoga and thoughts on how they relate to the world at large. The revised questions seemed to garner more fruitful responses than their earlier versions.

Throughout the interview process, I experienced discomfort in my role as interviewer. I felt reluctant to probe beyond respondents’ initial responses – I didn’t want to come across as intrusive and, more importantly, I often did not know how to frame effective follow-up queries. As a result, I probably lost several opportunities to enrich my data. All interviews came to a natural conclusion well within the agreed-upon one-hour time frame, ranging from 19-55 minutes in length. In the moment, however, I felt pressure to move them along. This is likely due to my own tendency toward impatience rather than any cues I might have picked up from respondents.

Although intimate familiarity with a topic can be fertile ground for bias to take root (Glesne, 2006, pp. 109-128), I feel that my role as a yoga “insider” was instrumental in establishing rapport with interviewees around our shared affection for and commitment to
yoga. The most successful part of each interview seemed to occur when I asked respondents to express how the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits “we” as yoga practitioners experience might radiate out into the world at large. This line of inquiry led to the development of robust reflections from respondents with respect to yoga’s potential to stimulate a cosmopolitan outlook. I offer more detailed analysis of my role as interpreter and the potential bias I bring to bear on the act of interpretation in the Findings section of this paper.

**Interview Profiles**

Unedited interview transcripts ranged from 2,000-8,000 words. Below, I’ve abridged them into profiles of about 750 words apiece. I’ve attempted to capture each respondent’s unique voice in the profiles and to refrain from analysis in this section of the paper, although I recognize that my interpretation already comes into play through the act of condensing the data into vignettes. See Table 2 for summary of interviewees’ backgrounds.

**Interviewees with 6-10 Years of Yoga Experience**

B.M. Happy to be interviewed, B.M. said “nobody ever asked me my thoughts on yoga.” She began practicing yoga eight years ago “mainly as a health thing.” To her surprise, she discovered community and spiritual aspects to yoga that she didn't think much about when she started. It just has happened as she’s kept doing it. Today, she describes yoga as a “contemplative art and spiritual practice. It shouldn't be competitive. It helps you to become more at peace with yourself, comfortable with yourself. And as you do that, you start to understand the world better.”

---

16 As discussed in the Sociocultural Context section above, my study participants and I travel in the same global network of yoga as social capital and therefore enjoy an implied sense of trust and understanding.
B.M. says that the physical aspect of yoga sometimes feels like “enlightened torture, full of strenuous and strange contortions. It’s genuinely challenging, but that's good – we should do things that are hard.” B.M. doesn’t consider herself a natural at physical pursuits. Although she’s always been good about exercising, she doesn’t have a dance or athletic background like many modern practitioners and says that as yoga grows on you and you get better at it, you feel virtuous and impressed that you can do this stuff. She’s “more of a mind person than a body person,” and recognizes in herself what she called “the Western tendency to think of the body's purpose as carrying around the head because the head is the source of the intellect.”

A year and a half ago after B.M. retired from her job, she started going to class twice a week instead of once. Not only did she notice improvements in physical strength, but she felt much more part of a community. It's always been hard for her to join groups because she tends to be individualistic, so she enjoys the sense of belonging she feels at yoga just because she’s there doing the same thing as everybody else. She observed, “it's not like people in class know each other that well, because you can’t really talk during a class, but I feel like we’re connected.”

As a poet, B.M. had a contemplative streak before she began practicing yoga, but she credits yoga with fostering a greater sense of self-acceptance and inner peace, something that she claimed also develops as we grow older. B.M. sees yoga overlapping with other areas of her life that contribute to a gradual spiritual maturing. She notes that “the little prayer thing done the beginning and end of yoga class” seemed just part of the routine for a while. But after some years, she started to experience it as “more of a spiritual thing.”

B.M. thinks the world is so frenetic, with loud music, road rage, anger, violence, and an “us versus them,” attitude. She feels that “yoga could bring people together. If everybody in the world practiced yoga, it would be a much better place. Then there would be more cooperation,
less violence. It would make people more accepting, but it’s a long process. You don’t reach enlightenment overnight. It’s very gradual and it’s not about perfection or competition.” She recently read an interview with a prison inmate who’s been practicing yoga for 20 years. The inmate described being skeptical when he heard about yoga, but once he started practicing, he reported feeling a peace he had never experienced before. B.M. also saw a TV news program about a yoga program for inner city elementary school kids whose focus improved after doing gentle yoga for half an hour after lunch every day. She is always impressed and amazed by stories of people who go out and do something that makes such a big difference, such as bringing yoga to marginalized people. Her own thoughts, however, tend to center around images or the next line in a poem, rather than social justice. She describes herself as more of an aesthetic person by nature than a reformer.

B.M. speculates that some of the reasons that could prevent people from practicing yoga might be what she termed as “cultural.” For example, men might think it's for women or it's kind of too touchy-feely. Some people might think yoga wouldn’t be hard enough while others might be concerned that it would be too challenging. B.M. wonders if yoga is associated with the more affluent world. She doesn’t know whether there are yoga studios in less affluent areas and thinks classes could be expensive for people on a tight budget. She’s aware that “all kinds of institutions are offering it these days. It’s even at my husband’s synagogue.”

E.F. says she practices yoga to keep her sanity. A former high school English in the Chicago public school system, she described becoming serious about yoga eight years ago at a time when she felt on the verge of professional burnout and suffered from anxiety and depression. She went into a yoga studio and “was hooked from there.” She eventually did a teacher training and made a career change to full-time yoga teaching. Since then, her mom has
passed away, she’s moved from Chicago to Boston, and she’s renovated two homes. She believes her prior life experiences have led her to the current point in her career of teaching yoga and Ayurveda.

According to EF, the goal of yoga is to identify ways to be of service in the world -- to help others, to make the world a better place. This requires a lot of other things and yoga gives us the tools or a model to do it. She said, “doing work to better ourselves makes us better people and has pretty immediate ripple effects within our own social circle.” EF isn’t “sure how well more people practicing mindfulness techniques, connecting with the body, figuring out how the mind works, and finding some higher good to follow might ripple out into the wider society,” but she doesn’t think it's going to make the world worse.

At the same time, she used the term “spiritual bypass” to describe how yoga might take people away from things in the world, and says:

It’s easy to buy into the notion that once everyone's doing yoga, we're all going to be unified and there'll be no harm because we'll realize that harming someone else is harming ourselves. But in practice yoga sometimes encourages people to become a little myopic and self-indulgent and privileged.

Additionally, EF thinks yoga as an industry is an obstacle to attracting more people to the practice. She finds “the image of what a yogi is in U.S. culture and the exclusive studio model to be alienating for most people.” Instead, EF wishes for “yoga to be used to build self-awareness that comes with the gifts of patience, kindness, and compassion.” She says, “it’s important to carve out time and space to practice being mindful and not distracted. It’s the routine that is more important than exactly what happens in that space. It could be sun salutations, sitting and breathing, petting your cat, or whatever.” She values what she calls yoga’s capacity to build community and wonders how we can use it to expand our circles.
**G.A.D.** In her late 20s, G.A.D. is the youngest person in the interview pool. She is a native of Pune, India, the home of the Iyengar Institute, but admits she was not interested in yoga nor did she “appreciate its importance” until she did an internship in Brazil for two and a half months when she was in college. She stayed at the home of an Indian woman who also happened to be a yoga teacher. G.A.D. went to her classes and “got a very different taste of the yoga practice. That’s when I thought, I want to do this for the rest of my life.”

The classes in Brazil were taught in Portuguese, a language G.A.D. doesn’t speak, so she described how she “mimicked the poses in class without understanding the movements.” When she returned to Pune, she studied with a local teacher who G.A.D. says also didn't give many instructions, so she again learned by imitation. Four years later, in 2016, she moved to the U.S. and considers that as the time her actual “study” of yoga began because she started “learning to use awareness to reflect and realign myself, not just externally but internally.” G.A.D. believes this approach helps her to feel more relaxed and integrated in her postures.

G.A.D. stated that yoga has made her a calmer person and has taught her how to manage her “short temper.” If she’s feeling overwhelmed and practices for just 20 minutes, she notices a positive difference. She said that yoga allows her to reflect on her behavior and thoughts and then take a considered course of action rather than responding impulsively. She also credits yoga with helping to balance other physiological functions, such as premenstrual tension. Through reading and self-observation, she is learning use her practice to support the hormonal changes that occur over the course of the month.

G.A.D. observes that until last year she was “obsessed with physical aspects of yoga poses,” but through learning from her teachers and studying philosophy, she has come to understand that “yoga is more for cultivating the mind than providing a physical workout.” She
says, “if you think the goal of yoga is limited to the physical body, you'll be stuck in the glue forever attaching you to your physical body.” She allows for the possibility of injuring one’s self while practicing postures but notes that even when you walk there's a chance that you might fall. “It's unlikely that one wrong action in a pose will land you in the emergency room. So, it’s important not to become immobilized by fear.”

G.A.D. feels her practice is becoming more mature – she no longer considers it an isolated practice for herself, but a way to experience her connection with everything and try to work in harmony with her surroundings and people. She recognizes that being consistent is an important part of building a good practice as is having good teachers. G.A.D. feels that yoga has helped her discern what’s really important in her life versus blindly fulfilling expectations imposed by society. She feels that:

The eight stages of Ashtanga yoga (moral principles, personal observances, postures, breathing, involution of senses, concentration, meditation, full absorption) outlined in the Yoga Sūtra offer universal principles (non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, non-coveting) that can guide people to act in a way that benefits society. Individual actions, like stealing from others or exploiting them, affects everyone in society. Yoga is not for making the body look better. It's to create a connection with everyone and to understand the impact of our actions. Integrating yoga philosophy with physical practice would make a difference in our outlook for society. For example, if we are violent towards the environment, it’s just going to burn out.

G.A.D. says, “at least in India, like someplace in the Himalayas” people may practice yoga to experience Samadhi, enlightenment. Elsewhere, she thinks that most people practice yoga to relieve stress and anxiety, and to improve their health in general. Some do it to show off or boost their ego by posting photos on Instagram or social media. She acknowledges that she is financially capable to study with different teachers because she has a good job, but not everyone can afford to do this depending on their financial situation. She’s aware that many teachers in the United States and back home teach yoga as a vocation rather than for financial gain and offer
discounts to students who want to learn but can't afford to pay the fees. She’s wary of treating yoga like a “private commodity that can be commercialized.” If it’s seen as a product rather than a service according to G.A.D., “it would be limited to a certain class of people who try to make a business out of it.”

Beyond finances, G.A.D. thinks there are many misconceptions around yoga practices and how people might be affected by them. Some people might stay away because their religion doesn’t allow it. And some might feel they’re too weak or out of shape. They might read information online about the risks of yoga and fear the worst possible thing that might happen to them while practicing.

**Interviewee with 11-15 Years of Experience**

**J.S.S.** originally started yoga because she had the beginnings of osteoporosis or osteopenia, a condition that runs in her family. The desire to “prevent her physical infrastructure from crumbling” prompted her to sporadically attend a yoga class in Needham for three or four years. When she moved to Boston, she became a regular participant in my Saturday morning Yoga Basics class at an upscale health club. She reflected that “over the arc of the last 14 years I’ve come into her own as a practitioner. I’m clear on why I do yoga and have learned to customize my practice to meet my individual needs and goals.”

J.S. claims she continues to practice partly for her posture but also for strength, flexibility, balance, and to be able to breathe well. Physically, she describes herself as “super bendy” but not that strong, especially in her core. She said she recognizes the tendency to beat herself up for not being able to do certain poses and has gotten better at accepting what she’s able to do. In addition to the physical benefits of yoga, J.S.S. notes that she is finding herself
increasingly more engaged in the meditative aspect of the practice and less focused on feeling, “holy s**t, this is really hard.”

J.S.S. obtained an Ed.D. in 2001 in adult developmental psychology from Boston University’s School of Education. After working for large corporations for several decades, she went out on her own professionally. She turned 60 a few years ago. During the years she’s been practicing yoga, both J.S.S.’s parents and her father-in-law passed away. She noted that while these are challenging parts of life, we know they will happen someday. Somewhat more of a surprise, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent successful treatment. She’s been cancer-free for five years. J.S.S. and her husband of 38 years have traveled the world together. They’ve recently gotten a new dog and enjoy cooking going to the theatre, and spending time with friends and family.

J.S.S. noted that she and her husband have found community at their synagogue. In fact, she credits her involvement with yoga with helping her to become more comfortable integrating all sorts of spiritual practice into her daily life, particularly her “Jewish self.” She said that the meditative aspects of yoga enhance her ability to talk with other spiritual seekers about how they wrestle with finding meaning in their lives.

While in treatment for breast cancer, J.S.S. joined a meditation group led by a Tibetan Buddhist chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital. She described the chaplain as “filled with light” and sometimes went to the sessions just to be in his presence. She feels that her time in the group helped her “recognize how incredibly powerful and valuable it is to be able to sit and be in a quiet place, collect myself, and focus on things that matter and let the other stuff go.”

J.S.S. observes that, at least in Boston, yoga seems to have become less gendered, with more men in classes. She feels it’s valuable for people to be tending to flexibility, balance, and
“all the other benefits that we get from yoga, Tai Chi, or anything that is a real discipline.” She sees value in having a disciplined focus that's outside of what we do for a living. “It's a way of taking stepping back from the day to day and doing something good for ourselves and potentially for the benefit of others around us and for the world.”

J.S.S. speculates that if more people practiced yoga and were more grounded:

We probably would have less road rage, fewer wars, and less of people feeling the need to shoot each other. The world would be a better place if people developed the self-control that comes from a practice that gives us the ability to think about someone other than ourselves.

J.S.S. finds that having a regular discipline like yoga has changed how “she shows up in the world.” She noted that easy access to yoga is a privilege that not everyone has. She believes that, “in the abstract, yoga is a practice that's available to everyone.” In practicality, however, there are populations for whom it’s probably not so accessible right now, at least in the United States. She wonders if there are ways for people with physical and mental disabilities to do yoga. She thinks the health and physical benefits, the discipline, the breathing and the other tools that yoga offers would be beneficial for kids in inner city schools who come from disadvantaged families. J.S.S. guesses that in India yoga is much more accessible to everyone “since it originated there and has connections with Buddhism and Hinduism.”

**Interviewees with 16-20 Years of Yoga Experience**

D.S. states that he started practicing yoga for three main reasons. Initially, it was to find a way of living with himself. Depressed and unemployed after abandoning his career as a foreign correspondent, he “began smoking weed all day and going to Iyengar yoga classes in the evening. “The intensity of focus he got in a class “felt so good,” that he ended up “trading his cannabis addiction for a yoga addiction.” He eventually went to India to study Iyengar yoga in
Rishikesh in the north with two teachers from Switzerland, and then later with a Brit located in Goa, on India’s southwest coast.

The second reason that drew him to yoga was a preexisting interest in India. He’d spent time there with sadhus (ascetic yoga practitioners) “hanging out around campfires and smoking hash.” He’d attended the Kumbha Mela, an important pilgrimage that takes place approximately every 12 years, with a copy of Iyengar’s book *Light on Yoga* in his luggage. He’d also taken a couple of meditation courses. From these experiences, he had the notion that what he was doing with somehow yogic and that it was going to change his life, save him. He now sees that “as a delusion and, once it fell away, I became curious about the meaning of yoga.” He could tell it did something to his body and allowed his mind a bit more space to face itself. But he said he was frustrated, especially in the Iyengar world, with references to philosophy that, according to his determination, failed to clearly connect to the physical practice.

This led him to pursue a master’s degree at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). There, he got an “intricate map, but it was a dry analysis,” which brought him to the third reason he practices yoga -- to “integrate and make embodied sense of these ideas. He now teaches courses designed to show how yoga philosophy can inform how we live.

Describing himself as somewhat of a masochist, D.S. said he liked going to Iyengar classes that focused on pointing out mistakes. Eventually, he grew tired of studying with teachers who “seemed intent on passing their own pain onto others.” This was when D.S. left the Iyengar system and began to practice on his own, rather than with a teacher or within a community. He credits his daily *prānāyāma* (breathing) and *āsana* with “keeping me feeling okay in my body and able to engage with the world.” At the same time, “for all of its claims to take us beyond the
mind,” D.S. feels that yoga “has not changed the way my mind works all that much.” But it's made him aware that he doesn’t have to cling to fixed ideas. He said, “being able to do that through physical practice is a gift.”

On the physical level, D.S. describes coming up against the “obstacle of his own flesh and bones.” He’s not as “bendy” as some on Instagram and said he’s hurt himself a couple of times trying to do things that like putting his legs behind his head before the sun comes up. He realizes that his tendency to “walk away from systems” has left him without a guide or mentor and has sometimes led him to question what he is doing and why. It's confused him about his choice to live outside the city, “so I have time to think, write, practice, and teach without having to do crazy jobs to pay the rent.” Yet, he feels isolated. He “wastes lots of time” engaging in yoga-related arguments on social media until he is blocked from the sites.

D.S. notes that “yoga philosophy suggests that much that happens in the world is beyond our control.” While it is helpful to acknowledge these limits, we also have the agency to question whether a direct connection between modern practice and ancient Indian philosophy exists rather than “pretending that texts say what we'd like them to say. Some texts indicate that the aim of yoga is to abandon worldly desires, identities, and roles.” That’s got very little to do with everyday life, according to D.S., and some prominent yoga seem to exploit this aspect of the yoga texts to justify inappropriate behavior, which often involves preying on vulnerable disciples who may be inclined toward unhealthy dissociation. D.S. worries that “turning yoga into a tool that disengages us rather than helps us be engaged doesn’t serve us well as a life skill.”

D.S. observes that the yoga texts clearly state that future suffering is to be avoided. He feels that learning to spot when we're making ourselves miserable and trying to stop that from happening is the real point of yoga -- to live skillfully, to remain even minded in the midst of the
chaos, not to disappear from it, as the Bhagavad Gita says. D.S. used to have ideas about “changing the world, dismantling capitalism, stopping climate change, but have no idea how to achieve them.” Now he focuses on trying to be a better human being, to be of service to the world through his teaching. At the same time, D.S. doesn’t believe there’s a connection between yogic states and the way one behaves in the world, pointing out that “revered gurus with talent for communicating deep wisdom sometimes behave shockingly badly.”

D.S. stated:

The world is burning and it’s entirely possible that humans will make themselves extinct before long. And facing up to that is deeply traumatic process. Yoga can give us the strength to face what’s really going on and not shirk away from difficult feelings.

He believes something universal exists that people can experience but isn’t sure it needs to be presented as yoga, saying “some things that are called yoga have very little to do with yoga. Conversely, other traditions that don't call themselves yoga train the mind.” He notes that the techniques of yoga have become globalized, lots of people have contributed to them.

J.S., a screenwriter for film and television and a recently retired professor at Emerson College, took her first yoga class in the 1980s when she lived in California. On her way to get a cup of coffee, she passed a yoga studio and decided to go in and try a class. She took classes at that studio for a while, then moved to Canada where she practiced sporadically, and then developed a regular routine when she relocated to Boston. That's when she “realized there was more to yoga than just āsana practice and became interested in a different way.” She began to practice outside of class at home “to explore movement, see what it felt like to do the poses more quietly than in a class and to hold them longer.” Then she decided to prepare to become a certified teacher and the “focus of her practice became a lot about that.”
Initially, J.S. practiced yoga because she “wanted more physicality, and she liked the movement of it.” As she ages, it’s to prevent falls that might result in her “shattering to pieces.” She credits her practice with increasing body awareness, especially when she encounters physical obstacles due to aging, stiffness, or injury. She speculates that if she wasn't doing yoga and injured herself, she would be annoyed at the inconvenience but not reflect on its causes. Instead, she feels that yoga “encourages a deeper experience of feeling and learning”. It leads her to work with a “whole new awareness that I really like.” Now, when she can’t do poses that she was able to do in the past, she realizes it as part of the yogic process of overcoming attachment to desires and learning to accept the reality of any given situation.

J.S. recognizes that professional obligations often interfere with her practice schedule. If she has to choose between doing her job or yoga, she chooses her job because she sees it as her responsibility. Overall, she feels that yoga makes her a better person, “more of an even human being.” Her practice has made her more aware of tendencies toward impatience and willfulness and has given her the ability to temper them. However, she bristles at the idea of “spiritually” and says “I don't go for the spiritual side of things and all that. I don't want to put those things on myself.” She acknowledges interest in “a deeper side of yoga” but not what she feels is generally referred to as yoga philosophy which “doesn't quite do it for me.” On one level, she feels that the goal of yoga is simply to get more [physically] flexible and to sweat and cleanse. Beyond that, J.S. sees that goal of yoga “to be more in touch with yourself, or your body for sure.” To “find a sense of quietness and peacefulness because it's messier and messier out there” [in the world]. She thinks it's important to have a space where you have a teacher and a moment of quietness where you're away from the “nightmare realities of living right now.” But she said it doesn't have to be yoga. It could be meditation or any kind of mindfulness practice. She thinks newcomers
should commit to six months to begin to feel the effects of a contemplative practice and be grateful for whatever comes.” It's a practice, not some revolutionary earth-shattering miracle, although it might be for some.”

J.S. observes a pretense in the yoga world for people to” claim they’ve become kinder and a wiser and more concerned for global wellbeing” yet in class exhibit a “needy energy be heard and noticed and seen,” which J.S. feels comes across as self-indulgent and inconsiderate of other class participants. She also notes that

We drive and fly all over the place to study with teachers we revere because yoga makes us feel good. We do it for ourselves. It’s possible to carry it out when we walk out of yoga class, but the world being what it is, I don’t think we do.

J.S. also observes what she calls an “elitist” strand in yoga. She says, “anyone can buy a yoga mat and do postures on their own, but you really need a class to show you what to do and what to do correctly, and this requires time and money.” She thinks yoga is hard to find in low-income neighborhoods.” J.S. wishes for a philanthropic effort to open up classes in diverse communities and to train people who represent those groups to be teachers. “Or maybe making yoga part of school curriculum, but the kind of school that would probably be able to do would exacerbate the whole problem of being elitist or very white.” It’s a tricky situation that J.S. thinks about often. She also feels that in “its own weird way yoga plays into the beauty myth.” This could be intimidating for a lot of people, especially when you walk into a class and “everybody's got great looking yoga clothes and 90% of the people are really fit.” Additionally, some people might be afraid of the “opening up of the whole self” that yoga postures require.

L.P.M. An athletic child, L.P.M. remembers enjoying gymnastics and other physical disciplines, but disliking competition and discontinuing whatever sport she was involved in if she felt pressured to enter contests. She began practicing yoga at age 13 during what she called a
chaotic time in her homelife. Her mother and father were not getting along. L.P.M. said she felt overwhelmed with having to help take care of her younger sister and grandmother, who lived with the family. She asked her mother to help her find a non-competitive, contemplative activity. Her mother had done prenatal yoga when she was pregnant with L.P.M., and suggested she try that. It was hard to find classes in Barcelona at that time, so she ended up having to take a bus to get to class twice a week.

L.P.M. described the class as focused more on one’s mental state while practicing rather than on postural technique. The teacher spoke very little, giving just a few instructions for counting the breath. L.P.M.’s mother laughed when L.P.M. asked for money to pay for a two-day silent retreat because she didn’t think L.P.M., a talkative teenager, could be quiet for two days. On the contrary, L.P.M. said she reveled in the quietness. She was always the youngest participant and felt taken care of by the others. After class or retreats, she felt rejuvenated and able to once again face the “war at home.”

L.P.M. practiced yoga informally on her own while living and studying in Barcelona and Paris. She also did fieldwork in a village in Senegal, where she lived with a host family, and attracted a lot of attention from the local kids when she practiced. When she returned to Spain in 2010, she began studying Iyengar Yoga and enrolled in a teacher training program which she credits with providing a structure for her practice to deepen. L.P.M. values B.K.S. Iyengar’s ability to integrate yoga philosophy into postural practice.

Although yoga has been L.P.M.’s “travel partner” for many years, she shared that it wasn’t easy to admit that after obtaining a degree in human biology, a master’s in medical anthropology, and doing research abroad, she was going to put it all aside to become a yoga teacher, a profession considered by her family and mentors as more of a hobby than a vocation.
Her thesis advisor begged her not to “move to the mountains to open a yoga studio” because the university needed her. However, L.P.M. said she realized that her yoga practice helped her see what she doesn’t want in her life and to confront and clean up obstacles, not just for herself but for all of humanity.

According to L.P.M., obstacles can be mental, such as telling yourself you’re not good enough or will never be able to do something. They also can be physical, like lacking sensitivity in some part of the body and then experiencing frustration and loss of faith that things can change and improve. She believes that obstacles can also “reveal how we embody social and cultural factors.” For example, L.P.M. described how she used yoga to overcome trauma from sexual abuse experienced in childhood. Certain poses awoke traumatic memories she felt were lodged deep in her cells, manifesting as stiffness or lack of sensitivity. She feels the work she’s done to release the effects of the trauma was not only for her, but for all the woman who have suffered sexual abuse. The goal of yoga for L.P.M. is to discover how we’re all connected and says that the tool or vehicle we use to do this is our individual selves.

L.P.M. feels that yoga helps to dispel the illusion that happiness is based on consumption and material possessions. It helps expand our perspective away from individualistic concerns, to realize that there are different ways of being. L.P.M. believes that yoga can help to address mind/body imbalances that lead people to rely on medications, develop eating disorders, experience depression and anxiety, self-judgment, etc. She thinks people might be reticent to try yoga because they think it’s a religion or that the practice itself will be static and boring. Yoga classes in Barcelona may be out of reach financially for some. Personally, L.P.M. doesn’t know who she would be without yoga and says it puts her touch with a force beyond her body and
infiltrates everything she does. She wonders if she will have a family and what it might be like to practice during pregnancy two bodies as one.

**Interviewees with More than 20 Years of Yoga Experience**

*B.C.* was introduced to yoga in 1988-89 through a “cognitive restructuring” program at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Boston. He enrolled in the program after being diagnosed with HIV and was told he would probably be dead in a few years, a fear he no longer lives with now that understanding of the disease and protocols to treat it have advanced. *B.C.* liked the yoga component of the Deaconess program and began attending a class in Brookline that the program director recommended. Soon, he says he was devoting 150% of his energy toward that. Today, he says he’s learned to balance his energy more evenly across his passions for oil painting, practicing and teaching yoga, learning cello, and his long-term relationship. He expresses yoga by living a full, balanced life rather than wanting to retreat to a cave in India or Tibet.

Dyslexic, *B.C.* claims he always found conventional learning difficult, but responded well to the kinesthetic approach used in learning a physical discipline like yoga. He said he was able to apply the same kinesthetic approach to learning to paint in the classical realism style and is now using it to learn to play the cello, too. He claims that yoga leaves him feeling more physically, mentally, and emotionally clear more than any other forms of regular exercise that he has done. And he notices a lack of clarity if he doesn’t engage with yoga for a few days. *B.C.* believes he has tapped into an awakening of the body’s subtle energy which has profoundly changed what it means for him to be embodied. He credits it with changing his quality of life and making him feel more grateful for what he has and less ambitious – he said he doesn’t put a lot of energy into selling his art or promoting himself as a yoga teacher. Instead, he feels content by simply engaging in the activities.
B.C. observes that yoga helps him feel physically strong, but that it builds character strength as well. He believes it’s given him the ability to be steadfast and present even during emotionally tumultuous moments, which was not the case before he developed a serious yoga practice. He says yoga has helped him develop a discriminating mind (viveka kyāthi in Sanskrit) that he applies to all avenues in life. For example, although he was trained to teach the Kripalu style of yoga, he continues to explore and learn immensely from other schools. He notes that people often think of themselves as fixed by their early 20s, but he’s been blown away at “how things keeps changing and evolving way beyond what I expected earlier in life. Yoga has taught me to think in terms of decades rather than months or years.” He sees this as a big shift given that “we live in a world that thrives on immediate gratification. A longer-term perspective changes how we live.”

B.C. sees the ultimate goal of yoga as merging with a divine or universal consciousness. But there are physical, psychological, and spiritual goals, too, such as experiencing all the human body is capable of. B.C. often describes the postures as the only form of exercise that takes the body through its entire range of motion, and he thinks there’s are psychological, energetic, and spiritual equivalents in yoga that demand we dive into the full extent of our psychology and our spirituality. He compares the yogic journey to preparing to climb Mt. Everest. You train, make sacrifices, and visualize what it’s like at the peak but don’t full experience it until you’re there. “Yoga takes us on a similar journey to fulfill our humanity.”

Although it’s possible to get injured doing yoga, B.C. has no doubt that if more people practiced regularly with thought and care:

There would be an enormous improvement in their quality of life and there’d be huge financial savings, particularly in the United States where healthcare is so expensive.” More people, individuals and public figures, might speak from a place of truth. Non-violence might become a priority over making more money. People might learn to be
content with what they have instead of being brainwashed into always wanting more. This is true even within the yoga community -- we've seen successful teachers cling to and exploit their celebrity. This idea of living in balance with ourselves, with the world we live in, would be good for the planet. On a day to day basis, we might be more connected and more compassionate with ourselves and one another.

In B.C.’s heart of hearts, yoga is the right thing to do for him personally, and for the world. He’s grateful to the yoga pioneers of thousands of years ago who developed a “science of spirituality” to study how human experience might be altered by moving the body, focusing attention, and breathing. B.C. sees parallels in the present day when yoga techniques, even the ones that have religious connotations, such as chanting OM, have been presented as dogma-free experiments. Teachers will invite students to try chanting a mantra to see what happens with the vibration, try a particular breathing pattern over an extended period of time, try doing these postures regularly and see what happens. In this way, he sees yoga as a “gateway to spirituality that is extremely different than what most of us who have grown up under Western religious orders have experienced.”

B.C. thinks that yoga has the potential to be practiced universally, even for people who are handicapped in significant ways. However, some people might have inaccurate assumptions and expectations about yoga and expect immediate results. He said it’s important for novices to give it some time to experience its effects. Some people may experience laziness, some might think it’s a cult. Others may begin practicing at a time or end up with a teacher that doesn’t fit their current life circumstances. B.C. notes that can be financial barriers since yoga tends to be expensive in the United States.

G.D. has been a fixture at the Iyengar Institute, in Pune, India, for the past 31 years. She shared that she considers the Institute her second home. She and her siblings joined the Institute because another brother had been practicing there since he was a child. Once G.D. had children,
they began studying there, too. She wonders if her infant grandson will do the same when he’s old enough.

G.D. observes that the poses came more easily to her when she was younger and when B.K.S. and Geeta Iyengar were there to guide her. Now that they’re deceased and her body is aging, she notes that things are getting more difficult. Nevertheless, she credits the imprint of the teachings she’s received over the decades with equipping her with the tools to face the challenges both within the context of her yoga practice and in her daily life. G.D. explained how B.K.S. Iyengar and his family supported her G.D. throughout her life, especially after her marriage at a young age, the birth of her children, and her subsequent divorce. She reflects that when we’re young and naïve, the world is open. As we mature, a different understanding sets in and we learn that we have developed the strength and courage to face the reality of daily life. She shared that the past 7-8 years have been especially challenging emotionally, physically, and financially.

As a yoga teacher, G.D. says she learns something new every day:

We learn by teaching. And that’s a beautiful thing. We don’t teach because it’s our job. We don't have to go out to show the world what you have done. That's not the point. The point is to engage in a learning process. B.K.S. Iyengar is known for saying “always be a learner.

G.D. feels that obstacles are good teachers and says, “when we fall down and break something, it gives us the courage again to learn and again to stand on our feet.” She describes the goal of yoga as learning through self-observation. G.D. reflects that B.K.S. Iyengar used to give “such intellectual answers to questions like this” when he was interviewed.

G.D. hopes to continue teaching “at the same tempo” in which she teaches now as she grows older. She sees her students transforming and wants to continue helping them mature in their practice. Despite the fact that yoga for health has “become so glamorous” around the world,
health remains an important reason to practice yoga. There is physical health, but G.D. also observes that people seem to be coming to yoga these days to address psychological and emotional distress more so than physical pain. She points out that “whatever reason brings one to yoga, it’s important to be persistent for the practice to have an effect.”

According to G.D., B.K.S. Iyengar always spoke about yoga being for everybody irrespective of gender, caste, age, or physical condition. But G.D. thinks some people may stay away because of the “fear complex.” They may be afraid that they will get injured in class or be afraid of showing perceived shortcomings in their body. “In those cases, just pulling yourself out of the house to attend class is a challenge.” She noted that “financial barriers can be overcome if you’re determined to do a class. You have to find a way.” As a yoga teacher, G.D. has faced financial challenges herself because her income is dependent on class fees, which are always variable.

G.D. said she enjoyed our interview and said “because life goes so fast and you're so much running up and down, you don't have time to stop and think about these questions unless somebody asks you. That's good.”

J.X.C. In addition to holding one of the highest Iyengar yoga teaching credentials in the Boston area, J.X.C. also is a social epidemiologist at the Harvard School of Public Health involved in studying the coronavirus. He says he envies people who are clear about why they practice yoga because he doesn’t think he ever articulated that for himself. He took his first class in graduate school at the suggestion of a friend who said J.X.C. looked stressed out. He quickly found himself taking lots of classes because yoga made him feel physically and mentally good and he enjoyed the community aspect. He began to search for a mentor(s) and found one in Patricia Walden and, later, B.K.S. and Geeta Iyengar.
Over time, J.X.C. says his motives for practicing yoga evolved organically to align with the reasons outlined in yogic texts (to dissociate the mind from distractions) but shared that he felt disingenuous stating that this process was intentional. He wonders how much is due to acculturation, or indoctrination, where people feel compelled to reframe their aims for practicing to align with the doctrine of their chosen discipline. At the same time, J.X.C. feels that embedded in the process is a willingness to let himself be changed by his relationship to yoga and to his teacher, a willingness to be changed without an attachment to how you think you're changing.

J.X.C. sees his understanding of his own yoga practice as developing alongside his ability to teach it to others. He thinks about his practice not just in terms of his own experience but also in terms of how to communicate it. Various health issues and the aging process, especially after 45, also inform his practice. He thinks that the biggest thing that's shifted his awareness and his practice was in 2012 when Geeta Iyengar provided him with individualized therapeutic instruction. He credits this experience with dramatically changing how he perceives yoga from the inside out.” With the death of B.K.S. Iyengar in 2014 and Geeta in 2018, J.X.C. said he feels a responsibility not only to continue sharing their work with others, but also to recognize that now he must guide himself since they are no longer here to tell him what to do.

Their passing also has influenced how J.X.C. looks at the trajectory of practice across one’s lifetime. He described how it causes him to reflect on how much time and energy he should devote to mastering certain poses versus other things. For example, to explore the breath and its link to the mind, J.X.C. noted that we need to stay in a relatively easy pose for 5-10 minutes. It can’t be done in a pose we can only hold for half a second. He says this is important because we’re often so focused on attaining poses that we forget that the purpose of yoga is to transform the mind. He recognizes that āsana is not the whole picture, but in the Iyengar method
it’s the doorway into the bigger picture. So, it's not that we shouldn't spend any effort, according to J.X.C., it's just that we have to understand it in its proper perspective.

J.X.C. credits what he called “the self-purifying acts” of yoga in making him more available to help others and do the right thing. He feels it’s important for people practicing yoga to use it to combat the fear and anger that he sees as the ethos of our time. He says that everyone is caught up in the catastrophizing mind, about the election, public health, whatever. To the extent that practicing yoga helps us to break those habits, J.X.C. believes it’s important to do as much as we can and let it soak in. It can be helpful for beginners to do as many classes as they can, to fan the flame of enthusiasm, and learn to love it. He cited the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (a guide on yoga techniques), which states that one of the qualities a yoga practitioner must have is enthusiasm. There's plenty of time later to study deeply with one teacher.

In J.X.C.’s view, the potential exists for yoga to be universal. However, not everyone will be drawn to it, based on their constitution, how they were brought up, their prior experiences, etc. He acknowledges that some of “us” fell in love with yoga right away, but J.X.C. also knows people who have practiced on and off for 20-30 years and then, suddenly, found space in their lives to be with it in a less casual way. So that can change. Realistically, he thinks time and money can be issues for people, especially if they feel pressured to wear the right clothes and have the right equipment. More broadly, J.X.C. worries that what he called the “commercialization of yoga” has made it difficult for people to “discern what the essence of yoga actually is.” There’s a lot of yoga available for people to practice, but they might not necessarily find a teacher or a studio setting where they're going to be able to taste all that yoga has to offer. At least in the West, according to J.X.C., people experience yoga as a consumer product – they go to a yoga class to get a service. He says this is not the same as studying a
discipline. “If you’re in an environment where you’re buying a service, it's all about whether or not you like what you’re getting instead of learning what you need to learn.”

J.X.C. perceives that sometimes yoga enthusiasts get into trouble when we become obsessed with spreading yoga to the masses. He is fine with finding ways to offer people yoga experiences but is less convinced that it is the yoga teacher’s job to propagate. He’s uncomfortable with an “evangelical strain” that comes out in westerners insisting everyone should practice yoga. In contrast, J.X.C. speculates that the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India, is “profoundly unconcerned” about attracting more and more people around the world to yoga. J.X.C. notes that “B.K.S. Iyengar had done that in early to mid-1900s, but that phase is over.”

K.D. feels that yoga represents a natural combination of the reflective practice she’s always been drawn to and the gymnastics she practiced as a child. In her 20s, while living on an island in Washington state, she practiced on her own at home. She didn’t consider going to a group class until her late 30s, noting that this is the opposite of how people typically get involved in yoga (by going to a class first and then developing a home practice). As her practice has developed, she feels she has gained a better understanding of which poses to do when and how they're going to influence her mood, energy level, etc. She says her practice builds inner confidence and clarity and, if she misses it for a few days, she notices she “feels less emotionally steady and more caught up in emotion.”

After K.D. and her husband went through a few miscarriages, and her dad died, she said she used her practice to work through grief and feelings of loss. She credits “going deeper in this way” to see what an important aspect of her life yoga had become and that she wanted to go further with it, to learn how to teach it to others. What she most wants to master in her teaching and in her own practice, she says, is clarity, precision, and compassion. She values studying with
teachers who can provide insight on how to move forward when she feels like she’s hit a wall or to take her in a direction that she has been avoiding unknowingly.

K.D. sees the goal of yoga as quieting the mind. She observes that it’s “easy to put my own perspective on things, to fill in the blanks of how I think something is.” Practice helps us to cut through that process. It shifts the intelligence toward more clarity. K.D. hopes that as she dedicates more effort to her practice, it will lead to other changes in her decision making or how she moves forward in her relationships and in her work. K.D. sees better physical health as an obvious benefit of yoga and believes that when we feel physically healthy, we have more patience for other things. To be patient with yourself is a lifelong practice. It takes time to develop, but when it grabs you it can change your whole perspective. It’s worth the effort. “When our minds are quiet, we have more capacity to be kind to others and we're not prone to making decisions based on greed or aggression.”

K.D. acknowledges that paying for yoga can be financially challenging for some people in the United States. At the same time, she needs to charge a certain amount at her studio because she also needs to make a living. K.D. wonders if some people avoid yoga because they are under the impression that you have to be a certain religion, age, or sex to practice. Also, K.D. thinks a lot of people are concerned they don't have the right body to do yoga because they’re not as flexible or stylish as the people in advertisements. She thinks some minorities might feel excluded, too. The only people of color K.D. tends to see in the yoga classes she teaches and takes appear to foreign nationals who are in the United States to study or to work.

K.D. thinks that having a yoga practice encourages you to integrate all aspects of yoga into your own lifestyle. And when those are integrated:

We start looking at bigger societal issues and questions and that might lead to something, such as a one-on-one relationship that you're more open to or some broader program or
offering you might be able to bring to a community that wouldn't have access to a practice otherwise.”

K.D. shared that she was very involved with social justice movements during and immediately after college when she traveled across country with Habitat for Humanity building houses and working with homeless in Philadelphia. As she’s matured, she feels like her views on those things also have matured and developed. She feels that as an older person, especially owning a studio, she might be able to support social justice in a way that she couldn’t in her early twenties when she “simply went along with whatever fell in front of me.” When she was first introduced to the Yoga Sūtra, she felt, “oh, that's not for me.” But as she got more into it, she began to reflect on yoga philosophy in the context of her own life and how it informs how she goes about decisions or interactions in her life. She says that questioning and exploration have allowed her to dig deeper into her own worldviews and how she wants to be, how she wants to interact with others.

L.J. holds a PhD in economics and conducts research for a non-profit organization in Western Massachusetts. She volunteer-teaches a yoga class at a nursing home, teaches general classes at the Y and hosts two websites – one to share her creative writing and another for her musings on yoga.

L.J. says the main reason she practices yoga is for the peace of mind it brings. Her journey began more than 20 years ago when she and her partner signed up for a yoga series at an adult education center. She reflects that it was just what she was looking for although she didn’t know it at the time. L.J. credits yoga with helping her develop a greater capacity to weather the storms and the ups and downs that life throws at you. Yoga philosophy and the physical practice have opened up a pathway into an experience with the ineffable soul that L.J. doesn’t think she could've gotten to without a physical practice, by just through thinking or reading about it. She
regards the physical aspect of yoga -- what it does, the way it helps her live in her body -- as a blessing. She said it gives her a sense of self that's rooted inside and not based on outside accomplishments, accumulations, or praise.

On the cusp of turning 57, L.J. feels yoga has given her the spiritual maturity to propel her into the next phase of life when “the more material pursuits fall away and something bigger is on the horizon.” Before her daughter (who’s currently an undergraduate at Smith College and just finished a year abroad in Spain) was born, L.J. took 3-4 classes per week and practiced a bit at home. Then she had to cut back on the number of classes she attended and also found it challenging to practice at home while caring for a young child. Once her daughter became more independent, she felt ready to take her practice up a notch. She found an inspiring teacher and also began teaching. She now considers yoga one of the most important things in her life even though “it took a while to get there.”

According to L.J., the goal of yoga is to find a connection to your deeper inner self and from there to be able to live a life with less violence against yourself and others. In fact, she experienced an act of violence by somebody she was intimately involved with. She said it wasn't physical violence, but still a kind of violence. She believes her spiritual practice has given her the tools to heal and to eventually feel compassion and forgiveness for the person who committed the violence. She sees that as a big spiritual journey that widens out and makes her think “who else can I have compassion for, who don't I have compassion for?” She believes it led her volunteer at the nursing home and gave her the capacity to do more. It forced her to explore things like attachment to pleasure and aversion to pain [two of the afflictions discussed in the Yoga Sūtra]. “What does that really mean? Is it possible to define equity?” She believes this type of inquiry cultivates compassion and humility and wanting to be of service because we realize
that we're all in the same boat. She speculates that finding ways to connect and be of service feeds us and brings contentment.

L.J. said yoga helps her to live with less judgment and more compassion, and to learn to be kinder and more generous before this life is over. These qualities are important to her and she doesn’t know if she would have come to them without yoga. She values having teachers and mentors and being part of a welcoming community. She thinks that having a guru-based system [such as Iyengar Yoga] puts everybody on the same plane, regardless of shape, size, or where we are in our practice. She shared that the people she teaches at the nursing home started yoga at age 90 and love it, telling L.J., “this is so great!”

L.J. thinks body shame keeps people away from yoga. She observed that it can take a lot of courage to walk into a yoga class – there’s fear that you’re not going to be able to do the poses and also just the fear of being seen. And grief related to being disconnected from the body. She wonders if people don't come back because of that and wonders if it can be easier to stay cut off. L.J.’s related that a friend opened a studio in Holyoke, a diverse community, but is finding it hard to attract people of color to the studio, something she had hoped to do. L.J. observed that obstacles are part of the practice. “If it’s challenging that doesn't mean it's not going well. Working with obstacles cultivates courage. Even if you're doing a little, it's more than enough.”

N.R. A geographic information systems (GIS) engineer by training, NR had just returned to Boston after having worked in Mexico for several years. With her fiancé still in Mexico and feeling dissatisfied with her job, N.R. fell into a depression. She had practiced ballet from childhood but now, in her early 30s, the regimen was not feeling good in her body. Her roommate suggested she try yoga instead. She did and thought it was great. Like the ballet of her
youth, her weekly yoga class gave her the space to let go of what was going on in her day and just be in her body.

N.R. eventually left her engineering job and took time off to visit family in Germany and Egypt. When she returned, she enrolled in her first teacher training at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in western Massachusetts. She began teaching yoga at HealthWorks in the Boston area and also learned to teach Pilates. She eventually became a dedicated practitioner and teacher of Iyengar Yoga. During this time, her fiancé came to Boston, they got married, went through infertility treatments, and eventually adopted a child. Then, in 2012, N.R. was diagnosed with cancer. She feels that her yoga practice carried her through her diagnosis treatment, and recovery, even though she did very little physical practice throughout this period.

N.R. reflects that she always did what was expected of her, especially by her father. She became an engineer to please him. She credits her yoga training with helping her learn to express who she is and to do the work she feels called to do rather than follow what others think she should do. Yet, like everyone, she admits to still encountering obstacles, such as what she called “feelings of inertia.” Physically, she’s recently been dealing with hip and groin pain and has had to adjust her postural practice accordingly. For N.R., the goal of yoga is not so much the spiritual emancipation discussed in the texts, but something more practical. She said she wants to overcome the inertia and other mental fluctuations that weigh her down. She wants to be present day to day and do the best she can with her daughter and in her other relationships. And she wants to enjoy life.

N.R. practices yoga so that she doesn’t feel “so crazy in her head,” to manage her daily life, and fulfill what she sees as her responsibilities. She explored various types of yoga as a beginner and noticed that no matter what type of yoga she did her mind moved inward rather
than outward. Now, after having practiced for more than two decades, yoga has become a regular part of N.R.’s daily life. She credits it with keeping her steady, sane, and stable. She said the work she does in yoga helps her go out into the world and feel more inclined to act with friendliness and tolerance toward the people she interacts with. She noticed a similar phenomenon several years ago when she taught a free class for low-income, single moms at St. Mary’s in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester. She observed that taking one hour a week to be in their bodies, to be quiet, and to have someone be interested in what they were doing, gave the participants the time and space to feel differently. And N.R. conjectured that maybe that figured into how they treated their kids or dealt with a challenge.

Yoga, according to N.R., helps us to come back to ourselves, to be able to disconnect from the distractions in this “crazy, crazy world from which it often feels like there is no reprieve.” She said it gives us the mental space to consider how to deal with a particular situation, whether it’s at home or work or larger so that we can function and be helpful to our family, our community, etc. N.R. notes that using yoga to become quiet inside takes time and practice. It can be helpful to set a goal to, say, practice for a month without giving up. Novices might try different teachers, different styles. Perhaps yoga won’t work for them, but running or tai chi will. N.R. notes that one has to find that place for themselves.

One of the things N.R. loves about teaching is feeling that she can make yoga accessible to anyone who shows up. But, she says, “you have to be able to show up. How would those women I taught in Dorchester get a yoga class outside of their community?” In practice, she thinks the availability of yoga as uneven. She sees it in Mexico City. She would love for her mother-in-law to go to a class to seek relief for some physical pain she’s experiencing, but there are none in her neighborhood. And classes are expensive relative to her mother-in-law’s income,
not to mention the clothes and equipment that advertisements suggest one must have in order to fit in. N.R. feels that yoga should be accessible but instead sees that it’s positioned as something elite.

R.T. began practicing yoga in 1989, at the age of 29, when he enrolled in beginner classes at the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India, at the “insistence” of a friend. After 3-4 months in a beginner class, he was allowed to join the intermediate class and, later, the advanced classes. He claims no prior exposure with yoga, but eventually going to class became a routine which he continues today. He began practicing yoga as a form of physical fitness, and now sees it as an essential part of life, a mechanism to enhance both physical and mental health.

In the early days of his involvement with yoga, R.T. says he would often smoke a cigarette before heading to class. He used to feel apprehensive before class, afraid of whether he would be able to do what his very strict teacher, Geeta Iyengar, demanded. But he kept doing it and felt better physically and mentally with each passing day. R.T. notes that yoga asks us to stretch our physical limits without fear. Early on, he admits he was afraid to do this but no longer. Specifically, R.T. credits his practice with helping to manage the backache he gets as a result of riding his “two-wheeler” in Pune on bumpy roads. He quit smoking and feels that yoga helps him manage his weight. And he feels better able to cope with mental stresses.

If R.T. faces emotional upheavals in his day, he says it sometimes hinders his ability to “attain what he should” in his yoga practice. Having a heavy meal before class and experiencing constipation also present hindrances but, otherwise, he claims he does not experience obstacles that interfere with his practice. He feels that yoga has helped him avoid illnesses that come with age, like diabetes or heart trouble, but having just turned 60, he realizes that some illnesses will inevitably creep in with the normal aging process. But if he continues to do yoga, he expects that
the imprints of his earlier practices might help him to continue to experience the benefits of yoga in later life. He plans to continue with yoga as long as possible. He derives inspiration from the people he sees at the Institute who are much older than him and still practice actively.

R.T. feels that his yoga training has instilled a discipline that has helped him organize his daily chores and his work better. He credits the protocols that students at the Iyengar Institute are expected to follow certain protocols with percolating into other areas of his life. He maintains fixed routines for sleeping, eating, and exercising. In addition to yoga, he has been jogging for many years and says it has improved his endurance and helped him approach the physically strenuous aspects of yoga. He is essentially a vegetarian and sticks to simple food. Sometimes he chants mantras to help to stabilize his mind. R.T.’s tendency to maintain a fixed schedule applies to yoga, too. He does it once a week only, at his regular class, despite the fact that experienced practitioners are expected to augment weekly classes with home practice. He speculates that “maybe I'm too lazy or maybe I require the [structure of a class] to be imposed upon. I don't have the self-motivation to do yoga at home.” But when he goes to class, R.T. says he does the best he can.

R.T. feels that yoga will enable him to be productive for a longer period of time for himself, his family, his local environment, and for society. He says yoga is good for society because it will help people kick smoking and drinking habits – “they will reach a stage where they no longer require intoxicants to manage stress.” He thinks that one of the barriers that people might face in starting yoga has to do with religion, saying “there is a misconception that yoga is for Hindus only. But it is not. Although yoga developed in India, it is meant for all people, irrespective of the religious they profess.” He cites inertia is another hindrance noting that “some people are just lazy and won't want to exert themselves.” He understands that yoga
may be expensive in other countries, “but this is not a valid reason in India. People can start practicing yoga by following video or audio tapes available, or on television if no yoga teacher is available nearby. Books are available, too.” He believes the Indian government’s plan to make yoga compulsory in schools is an effort in the right direction. He thinks “if it is introduced in school, people will get exposed and benefit from it at an earlier stage.”

**S.G.** The reasons S.G. practices yoga have been revealed to her over the 26 years she has been directly involved in the subject. She says she practices because she “could not possibly do otherwise.” She described her daily practice as chanting or praying before she speaks to anyone in the morning. Then, on days when her schedule allows, she’ll do an hour of *prānāyāma* (breath work) and meditation, and then *āsana* (postures). She feels that yoga has helped her develop a level of certainty and comfort that brings about inner calm.

A child of the 1960s, S.G. describes her parents as alternative lifestyle thinkers and “be- ers.” Both parents practiced yoga, so she feels that it was in the air she breathed. S.G. attended a small, quirky, independent school schools in New England, in a graduating class of 14. There, she became fascinated with Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau's relationship with the natural world and their engagement with Sanskrit and yoga texts A lifelong Quaker, S.G. says in “Quaker lingo” this study “spoke to my condition. It felt true to me.”

After graduating from college, S.G. lived in Japan for several years. Her own practice of yoga began when she returned to the United States to attend Harvard Divinity School. Always interested in the ways that spiritual life is informed by sacred texts, her first entry into yoga was through studying yoga texts. She notes that the similar language used in post-Vedic texts, Quakerism, and other religions to describe a divine inner light suggests a universal truth that she believes cuts across ages, culture, context, gender, and economics.
S.G. feels that she has developed the capacity to use yoga diagnostically, to know how to sequence poses to balance her body and mind. Her gradually deepening engagement with the physical practices of yoga is helping her:

corporeal vessel to become more awake, aware, and alive to the seed of divinity that connects me to a reality that I share as a human being with others. There's some parallel reality, a spiritual realm that’s always around us, always engaging us, always impacting us. And I think yoga, helps me see a glimmer of that.

S.G. nearly drowned as a child. Among her clearest memories is looking up at shimmering light as her body sank into the water, and then being resuscitated on shore. She feels that this experience has called her to be with people who are dying. In the mid-1980s, when HIV/AIDS shifted how young people were when they died and what that transition looked like, she worked on needle exchange programs in the Boston mayor’s policy office. She holds wilderness medical certifications that enable her to participate in search and rescue teams for Outward Bound. She described her most significant experiences in this area as helping her mother and brother “transition.”

After having surgery to remove a brain tumor, her brother spent some time in rehab and then moved in with S.G. who took care of him for two years before he died. She fed, bathed, and shaved him, administered his medications, and took him to every doctor’s appointment and to physical and speech therapy as he learned to walk and speak again. A second tumor developed, was removed, and he recovered again. Then he was diagnosed with a third tumor which he chose not to treat. S.G. notes that it was remarkable to be with somebody who is dying, to watch the transition to a different reality. For a few hours before he died, there was a luminescence to his skin. Almost exactly a year after her brother’s passing, S.G.’s mother had a significant stroke and SG cared for her in her last days. She notes that she is of a particular age where friends or
family get ill and die, and there are a lot of big shifts and changes. She feels calm, present, and at peace in these situations in a way that she doesn’t think she could be without her yoga practice.

S.G. wishes for a world in which yoga practices contribute to making people calmer, more centered, more whole, or at the very least more polite to each other, “a world where we recognize differences and have empathy for where those differences might arise from. A world that is less aggressive, more loving, compassionate or empathetic, less individualistic.” She wonders how would people would treat each other if we truly thought we were looking at the divine in each person and spoke to that? She’s of the mind that it doesn't matter why or how people come to yoga. They might have a tight muscle or want a yoga butt, but as long as they're touching yoga in some way, it has the potential to go someplace deeper. She referenced studies on using yoga to manage pain or depression usually report positive results after three months of practice and imagines what could happen if someone did it for five years.

S.G. notes that “through no real work of my own, but just by the fortune of my context” she has the time and space in her life to commit to a daily practice. Her biggest obstacle is time management. She understands that “not everybody gets to have that. If you're working a couple of jobs, have kids, and are the sole parent, how do you do yoga? It would look different from my practice.” However, while practical barriers might stand in the way of someone’s ability to practice yoga, S.G. believes “the truths are universal.” In the communities she travels in, she notes that she has the good fortune to be able to point people to making financial gifts to support yoga initiatives, such as funding the purchase of equipment for a yoga studio or funding a teacher who teaches in communities where yoga might not be easily accessible.
S.G. sees union with the divine as the goal of yoga. She reflects that she learned this from being with people who were dying and feels that she is prepared for her own death whenever it comes, by being content and settled, and already having touched that union.

**Data Analysis**

**Quantitative**

Aggregate survey responses generated automatically by Google Forms show that 44% of respondents report that their engagement with yoga plays a role in shaping their views on social justice issues. Twenty-five percent of respondents answered “somewhat” to this question and 12% indicated that they do not believe yoga plays a role in influencing their views. Close to nineteen percent reported never having considered this question before. This finding might not give the full picture, however, since some respondents who answered “no” or “somewhat” declared strong interest in social justice but reported that their views predate their involvement with yoga. One survey respondent stated their belief that people who care about social justice are more likely to participate in yoga than those who don’t highly value social justice.

It appears that respondents interpreted the survey question on social justice from more of a causality standpoint than I had intended, pointing to a problem generated by using the term “social justice” in the survey as a proxy for a cosmopolitan outlook. As noted in the Data Collection section above, I phrased the question this way in the attempt to give specific examples of social justice issues (e.g., wealth distribution, educational opportunity, migration, and the environment) that would likely concern people interested in making the world a better place. In retrospect, this framing seems to represent a misstep in the data collection process. It might have been better to ask respondents to name a few qualities (or to choose from a dropdown list of
qualities) they feel their involvement with yoga has cultivated, and then further pursue this line of questioning in interviews. I ultimately did pursue this route during interviews.

**Figure 1 Aggregate Survey Responses to Social Justice Question**

The response segment to this question that most piqued my interest is the 19% who claim to have never considered the connection between yoga and social justice. This data goes against an often-unexamined assumption in modern, Western society that yoga and progressive political views go hand-in-hand. Along these lines, one survey respondent noted, “I often ponder the

---

17 Although 107 respondents participated in the survey, one person did not respond to the social justice question.
schism between Yoga being inherently part of conservative camp while it found home within progressive culture in the west” (survey coding, lines 196-198)\textsuperscript{18}.

To investigate possible trends or patterns within subgroups, I cross-tabulated the data to look for correlations between years of practice and response to the social justice question. I also examined potential connection between these two data points within the interview sample. Findings reveal that survey respondents with 16-20 and more than 20 years of yoga experience, as well as interviewees, report that their engagement with yoga helps to shape their views on social justice at almost double the rate of respondents with 15 or fewer years of reported involvement with yoga. Notwithstanding noted problems with the phrasing of the social justice question, these findings suggest that practitioners involved with yoga for 16 or more years perceive yoga as an important determinant in their attitudes and behaviors with respect to making the world a better place.

\textsuperscript{18} See Literature Review for coverage of how the study of the philosophy contained in yogic texts was exclusively the domain of the conservative, socially elite in an ancient India. During subsequent periods of social and political upheaval, experiential yogic practices evolved that were available to a broader population. And centuries later, beginning in the 1800s when awareness of yoga made its way to the West, yoga philosophy and practices were adopted by countercultural iconoclasts typically associated with progressive social causes. Coming full circle in India, the current ruling party, the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party, is engaged in domestic and international efforts to promote yoga as part of its conservative Hindu nationalist political agenda.
**Figure 2** Survey Responses by Group

Qualitative

For responses to the open-ended survey question, I used line-by-line coding to “fracture” the data to reveal patterns and uniqueness across responses. For example, many survey respondents cited deriving guidance from yoga philosophy as important determinants of their perspectives on social justice – 19 respondents named the *yāmas* and *niyamas* (restraints on negative behaviors and positive characteristics to be developed)\(^1\) as sources of inspiration. Six

\(^1\) The Yoga Sūtra (and other texts, such as the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*), discuss the *yamas*, or restraint of tendencies toward violence, untruthfulness, stealing, promiscuity, and greed as “great and universal vows, applicable to everyone throughout the world, regardless of [social] class, place, time, or circumstance. They are considered to be “universal” (Bryant, 2009). The *niyāmas*, on the other hand, are positive attributes: purity, contentment, discipline, study of scriptures, and surrender to a divine power.
survey respondents referred to the friendliness, compassion, joy, and indifference to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice advised by verse I.33 of the Yoga Sūtra (Iyengar, 1996) as a guiding force in their lives. And several others noted that awareness of and ability to manage the obstacles (ignorance, ego, attachment, and aversion) outlined in the Yoga Sūtra helps steer them toward skillful action in the world.

In addition to revealing that yoga philosophy helps respondents to navigate their attitudes and behaviors toward social justice, initial coding of survey data indicated that they also feel that body-oriented practices (such as postures, breathing, and meditation) influence their actions in the world. Together, these finding populate an analytic category I’ve labeled “yoga practice shapes social justice views.” Alongside this category is the almost complete opposite sentiment expressed by some respondents indicating that because their social justice views predate their involvement with yoga, they do not feel that yoga has influenced their development. They do, however, admit that their practice gives them a framework to reflect on and express their views. Finally, respondents observed that the “image” of yoga as a glamorous lifestyle promoted in the public domain can position yoga in an elitist and superficial light.

Table 3 Focused Codes to Emerge from Survey Data

| Yoga practice shapes views on social justice |
| Yoga does not shape social justice views but does provides a framework for reflecting on them |
| The commercialized “industry” that has grown around yoga is problematic |

These emergent categories are integrated into the analysis of interview data covered in the Findings chapter. After condensing each interview into 500-1,000 word “profiles,” Then I coded the contents of each interview to correspond to the concentric circle framework discussed in the Theoretical Mandala chapter, to examine how interviewees’ comments relate to the
spheres of self-care, family, community, and the world at large inherent within the study of cosmopolitanism.

**Validity of Study**

Qualitative researchers have an array of interpretive frameworks at their disposal to study social phenomena. They seek to understand the studied phenomena based on the experience(s) of study participants rather than to prove a hypothesis through scientific method. They probe their own biases and preconceptions through intensive reflexivity, recognizing that it is impossible to completely root out ingrained assumptions but important to acknowledge them. They also employ a variety of validity and reliability measures to interrogate a study’s trustworthiness. Creswell and Poth (2018) present nine possible validation strategies and recommend that any given study engage in at least two of the strategies outlined in Table 4. I believe I’ve satisfied this benchmark by engaging in reflexivity and presenting a negative case in my findings by providing interview data on how some respondents feel that modern yoga contains elements that might cause some people to self-exclude or be overlooked by the “in” crowd (see Community Exclusion section). Although Table 4 suggests that study readers determine whether the work contains sufficient thick description, I feel that I have provided enough in this area to support the trustworthiness of my study.

**Table 4 Validation Strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Engaging in Reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Case Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Member Checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborating with Participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sociocultural Context

The spread of modern yoga from India to the West, back to India, and into other regions of the world (e.g., China, Russia, southeast Asia, Africa) can be viewed as part of the cross-border exchange of economic and social capital associated with globalization. As with most aspects of globalization, however, not everyone participates equally. The forms of yoga so popular today seem to represent a form of social capital shaped by and available only to people across the globe with the time and money to devote to modern conceptions of yoga study (such as classes offered in a studio setting or a teacher-training program with admission criteria and steep tuition fees). Defined as a set of social norms, values, beliefs, trust, obligations, and information that fosters cooperation and benefits for a network of people, social capital can be considered a marker of prestige and power (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Current conceptions of social capital theory are attributed to sociologists Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) and James Coleman (1926-1995), and political scientist Robert Putnam. I first came across the term social capital in one of the two required interdisciplinary seminars of the doctoral program at Lesley, when I read education expert Richard Rothstein’s work on the education gap in the United States. Rothstein notes that social class is an important determinant in an individual’s predisposition toward and access to certain forms of social capital which, in turn, impacts access to and people’s abilities to benefit from educational opportunities (2004). This led to me consider modern, “global” yoga as a form of social capital.
According to Putnam (n.d.), examples of social capital include a group of neighbors keeping an eye on one another’s homes and email exchanges among members of a cancer support group. The motto in the popular American TV series, *Cheers* “where everybody knows your name” captures an important aspect of social capital. I have experienced parallels to these examples in my yoga travels around the world. I’m part of a worldwide community of “cosmopolitan”^20^ Iyengar yoga practitioners who speak a common language (typically English, with a smattering of yoga-oriented Sanskrit vocabulary), participate in the same approach to yoga as a spiritual practice, and enjoy an implicit level of understanding and trust. I’ve taken classes in Poland and have been able to follow along without understanding a word of Polish. I’ve rented apartments in Pune, India, based solely on the prospective landlord’s and my being Iyengar insiders, and have practiced alongside people from all over the world with similar training.

Outside of the Iyengar global community is a wider circle of yoga practitioners who follow other methods or paths of yoga. While we may speak different dialects [of yoga], there is enough mutual interest to sustain a broader network of social capital. As an English-speaking, white, middle-aged, educated, professional with the resources to participate in yoga instruction at home and during annual trips to India, I recognize that I study yoga from within this privileged circle^21^.

---

^20^ The term “cosmopolitan” can refer to “just about anybody who moves about in the world” (Hannerz, 1990).

^21^ Studies conducted in the United States and Australia show that close to 80% of those who identify as yoga practitioners are white, college-educated women (Park, Braun & Siegel, 2015; Penman, Cohen, Stevens & Jackson, 2012).
homogeneity, inevitably, exerts influence on my study’s findings, which likely would have generated different results if it had included people with varying levels of access to yoga as the form of social capital described herein.

It’s worth examining who exists outside of this network and, by extension, whose voices are not included in my study. In India today, millions of people from various economic strata likely practice yoga in their homes and local communities with little fanfare (Harrington, 2008, p. 246), guided by indigenous wisdom embedded in the social fabric and passed down from generation to generation. While they might tune into television guru Swami Ramdev’s daily yoga show or use his popular videos and YouTube recordings to guide their practice, awareness of yoga as both a philosophical system and as a set of observances is likely present in their lifeworld even if they do not engage in specific yogic practices consistently. At the same time, many Indian nationals do indeed participate in the global yoga network of social capital.

Epitomizing the “pizza effect,” participation in yoga among the hip and fashionable in India often mimics its counterparts abroad, transforming how modern Indians understand and practice yoga (Sarbacker, 2014, p. 100). According to San Francisco-based public radio commentator Sandip Roy (2010), media coverage of global celebrities like Madonna and Sting

---

22 Habermas describes lifeworld as a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation. Cultural knowledge that is “always already familiar” is embedded in the lifeworld (Brookfield, 2005).

23 Coined by anthropologist and Sanskrit scholar Agehananda Bharati (1970), the term “pizza effect” refers to the phenomenon of cultural elements being embraced elsewhere, transformed, and then reaccepted by the culture of origin. It is named after the idea that modern pizza toppings were developed among Italian immigrants in the United States, and later introduced in Italy.

24 Stuart Ray Sarbacker, a professor of Indic religions at Oregon State University, specializes in yoga and tantra.
modeling fancy yoga postures sparked more interest in yoga for some of his contemporaries than any sense of cultural heritage or tradition. In an amusing account, Roy notes that his American friends tend to assume he knows yoga simply because he’s Indian. Yet he asserts having no experience with the modern practice and knowing very little about its origins. A friend interviewed in his story agrees, noting that her non-Indian yoga teachers know much more about yoga’s history than she ever learned at home in India. In fact, some Indian nationals living in the United States (Narasimhan, 2018, pp. ix-xii; personal communications with Gauri Ajay Dani, 2018-19), claim to have disregarded yoga as an old-fashioned pastime from their parents’ or grandparents’ generations until they (re)discovered it on their college campuses and/or while living abroad. Prashant Iyengar acknowledges that increased interest in “yoga for health has crept into India” (personal communication, January 2019), largely as a function of booming global appeal and aided by high-profile governmental efforts to promote yoga. A 2017 news article in an Indian publication claims that the rising number of yoga practitioners in India is dominated mostly by affluent women who take classes at their health clubs ("International Yoga Day: 20 percent rise in practitioners, says AS SOCHAM survey," 2017).

While economic autonomy and proficiency with English determine to some degree admission to the social capital network of yoga within India, socioeconomic stratification as a barrier to admission likely plays a larger role outside of the country, especially in the United States. While information on yoga is ostensibly available to anyone with an Internet connection (G. Feuerstein in Desai, 2004), the consumer market that has sprung up in the United States around yoga is deeply segmented. Well-heeled people with discretionary time and income frequent popular, expensive yoga studios (Broad, 2012; White, 2012), while people of color, plus-sized bodies, and different abilities report feeling awkward and out of place in these
mainstream settings and are instead establishing alternatives classes (Murphy, 2014; Rios, 2016). Marketing campaigns that feature lithe white women reinforce this dynamic by sending an implicit message that others are not welcomed. In addition, yoga is unlikely to be a priority in the United States and other western countries for people living at or below the poverty line whose struggle to provide food and shelter for their families takes precedence other endeavors that may be seen as recreational or frivolous (Newcombe, 2005, lecturer at the Open University in the U.K, who researches modern yoga from a sociological and social historical perspective).

Managing Preconceptions

The material covered in doctoral course, the Nature of Inquiry, has been deeply influential in shaping my scholarly views. Among other gifts, the course challenged me to examine the “nature of my own nature of inquiry” (personal communication, Dr. Caroline Heller, Fall 2012), prompting me to consider not only the sociocultural factors that shape my personal worldview but also how research methodology and recognized theoretical frameworks might influence the work I produce. For example, identifying a sample population from the global yoga network in large part determined the structure and focus of the finished product. In a number of instances, interviewees tacitly acknowledged being part of the global network of those with access to yoga as social capital by saying things like “some of “us” fell in love with yoga right away,” or “”we” do yoga because it makes us feel good’ (statements by interviewees J.X.C. and J.S., respectively). All interviewees, regardless of their country of origin or years of yoga experience, were initially introduced to yoga through a “studio model,” meaning that they went to a center where yoga instruction was offered for a fee, thus reinforcing the idea of yoga as social capital.
Qualitative research prizes reflexivity around preconceptions involving race, age, class, gender, etc. as the preeminent skill for managing researcher bias (Agee, 2009, p. 3; Luttrell, 2010, p. 4). Strong reflexive skills help researchers see the big picture from multiple viewpoints and to be open to differing perspectives (Leavy, 2011, pp. 78-79). As I embarked on my study, I felt aware of some of the biases that could stem from my position as a white, educated, English-speaking yoga practitioner with the resources to study in the United States and abroad. Through personal observation as well as review of literature, I was aware that many people in the United States lack the time and money to consistently participate in yoga classes (Park et al., 2016). I therefore assumed that participants in my study also would recognize and be concerned about this socioeconomic disparity, address it in their interviews, and unanimously advocate for increased access to yoga for low-income and other marginalized populations.

While some interviewees did express themselves in this way, I had not previously noticed my bias in this regard, especially in the context of interview responses from Indian nationals. One respondent, G.D., a lifelong devotee of B.K.S. Iyengar whose three siblings and own offspring also have studied with Iyengar since childhood, cited Iyengar’s oft-repeated claim that yoga is a universal practice available and adaptable to everyone. Divorced at a young age, G.D. voiced gratitude for how B.K.S. Iyengar and his family provided care and support to her during her years as a single parent. Based on this personal experience, as well as closely observing Iyengar and his children and grandchildren, who also teach at the Institute, offer teachings and community to an ever-growing circle of students from India and abroad, G.D. did not see any reason that people would not know about yoga or face challenges in securing instruction.

25 Including Iyengar’s significant philanthropic efforts to build schools, hospital, temples, and yoga schools in the village of Bellur, in Karnataka state, his birthplace.
Another respondent, R.T., an engineer by training and my landlord during my most recent stay in Pune, stated that the only thing preventing people from pursuing yoga is “sheer laziness,” mentioning that yoga is available “everywhere in India,” even on daily television. Unlike G.D., who had grown up at the Iyengar Institute, R.T.’s involvement at both the Institute, and with yoga, is more contained. He began attending a weekly class there 30 years ago and continues that schedule to this day, although at some point along the way he advanced from beginner to advanced-level postural classes. He does not practice outside of his weekly class, nor is he familiar with or interested in studying yoga philosophy. He expressed a very pragmatic approach to yoga, where he views it as a valued part of his health and fitness regimen rather than a lifestyle or lived philosophy. In my interactions with R.T. during the month I resided on his property, I discerned that his relationship with yoga seemed indicative of a generally rational, practical approach to life, as evidenced by the plans he shared to review potential marriage matches for his daughter, to managing the rental units and impressive organic garden on his property, to reading the newspaper on his front porch at the same time every afternoon. This observation of his personality, combined with the blank stare I was met with in our interview when I asked why people might face barriers to participating in yoga, led me to conclude that he sees access to yoga as a straightforward task with no external obstacles.

I was surprised that G.D. and RT did not seem to consider time, money, and social status as barriers standing in the way of marginalized groups’ ability to access yoga, probably because I was looking at the topic from my personal, Western frame of reference, and not adequately

26 According to a typology of yoga practitioner developed by Henrichsen-Schrembs (2011) and discussed in the Literature Review, R.T. clearly fits into the “pragmatic” category of practitioner.
taking into account how their sociocultural perspectives and personal experiences might lead them to different conclusions.

In addition to uncovering and confronting biases with respect to data analysis, I also acknowledge that all of the literature I’ve consulted for this project is written in or translated into English, which could contribute to a partial view of the subjects being studied. For example, Indian anthropologist Ananta Kumar Giri (2006) notes that the revival of scholarly interest in cosmopolitanism at the turn of the millennium draws primarily on the Western trajectory. By failing to include perspectives from outside this narrow realm, the notion of cosmopolitanism itself is contradicted, according to Giri, since it implies the inclusion of thinking and experimentation outside of our immediate sphere and involves transformations in self, culture, society, economy and polity (p. 1277). To acknowledge this pitfall, I have taken measures to include work by scholars and yoga practitioners from around the globe in my study.

**Literature Review**

Some grounded theory practitioners postpone or altogether omit literature reviews from their studies for concern that they reinforce preconceptions. I was a bit taken aback when I learned this information, as I had reviewed relevant literature and written it up in my Qualifying Paper long before settling on grounded theory as the analytic framework for my dissertation. However, Charmaz (2014) and Birks (2019) feel that the benefits of engaging with the literature in a given field outweigh the potential pitfall of intensifying preconceptions. They advise memo-writing to expose taken-for-granted perceptions the researcher may hold about themselves, the

---

27 Notable exceptions include Hansen (2011), who outlines Confucian thought with respect to cosmopolitan ideals (pp. 22-24) and Nussbaum (1997), who cites Nobel prize winner Rabindranth Tagore’s contributions to intellectual engagement that seeks to pull from one’s native culture and foreign influences to create an artful cosmopolitan mosaic.
research topic, and the world (p. 159). I followed their advice to ponder the preconceptions that might have been formed from the literature studied prior to undertaking my research, especially after realizing that some of my findings correlate closely with those reported in earlier studies. In the attempt to manage the potential to be influenced (any further) by the prevailing literature, I completed the data analysis and discussion chapters of this dissertation before revisiting the literature presented below.

**Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Yoga**

In a contemporary landscape where physical postures are typically the most widely recognized aspect of yoga, coupled with a tendency for marketing campaigns and teacher training programs to tout yoga’s ancient pedigree (Pizer, 2018), it’s not surprising that many people assume that the postures practiced today “evolved in a straight line…from the ancient texts to their modern-day manifestations” (White, 2012). Of course, it’s not that simple. The philosophical foundations of yoga appear to predate their experiential, body-oriented counterparts by at least 500 years, and the ongoing development of modern yoga postures is influenced as much by the time period, geographic location, and cultural setting in which the practices take place as they are by ancient teachings (Singleton, 2010).

**Philosophical Origins**

A vast subject with ancient roots, yoga surfaced several millennia B.C.E. as a system of philosophy based on the Vedas and aimed at guiding adherents toward inner peace and connection to a divine source. Its tenets are laid out in texts that describe devotional, intellectual, and action-oriented paths that might be pursued in this endeavor. The Bhagavad Gītā for instance, introduces yoga as a system that requires adherents to dedicate their lives to making the world a better place without regard for personal gain or interest (Malinar, 2012, p. 58), while the
Yoga Sūtra (YS) investigates the behavior of the mind and its attachment to worldly objects as the cause of pain and suffering. The YS also offers guidance on practice techniques to dissociate the mind from these sources of pain and, in the process, facilitate spiritual liberation (Bryant, 2009; Iyengar, 1996).

The Bhagavad Gītā and Yoga Sūtra are part of an extensive collection of literature associated with at least nine distinct systems of philosophy (see Appendix A) which, according to philosopher and, interestingly, president of India from 1962-1967, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1957), share common characteristics:

**Table 5** Characteristics of Indian Philosophy as explained by Radhakrishnan (1957)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humans are spiritual in nature; philosophical inquiry guides us toward our spiritual destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy is practical as well as theoretical. It should be lived, not simply known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the self, or introspection, is more important than knowledge of the external world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuition is more important than reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority and tradition are to be revered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony should be established between divergent concepts: religion and philosophy, knowledge and conduct, intuition and reason, humans and nature, God and humans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Radhakrishnan (1957) also outlines four developmental stages of Indian philosophy during which the philosophical systems emanating from the Vedas were conceived and documented: the Vedic stage from 2500-600 BCE, the Epic period from 600 BCE- 200 CE, the Sūtra stage from 200 CE-500 CE, and the Scholastic era from 500-1800s CE). These stages owe their particular shape and perspectives in part to political, economic, and cultural influences of the day. For example, the epic stage occurred during the years of the Gupta Empire (300-528...
CAN YOGA HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

Considered a Golden Age, classical Sanskrit literature such as the Mahabharata, in which the Bhagavad Gītā is encompassed, flourished. The ensuing scholastic stage of philosophical development (and, which Radhakrishnan notes, ended with British rule in India), overlapped with approximately 1200 years of medieval Indian history from the 500s until the 1700s.

Hardy (1990), a scholar of South Asian history and religions, explains how male members of the elite, brahmin caste molded strands of ancient Vedic thought into religious doctrine reserved for the most prestigious social groups, while “untouchables” were excluded (p. 55 & 72). However, after the collapse of the Gupta empire, a period of political instability ensued as numerous indigenous factions and/or foreign invaders wrestled for and assumed political rule of India (Keay, 2000; Kulke & Rothermund, 2010; Walsh, 2006). According to South Asian religious studies scholar David Gordon White (2014), the volatile political landscape exerted a conservative influence on religious scholars who (re)interpreted Vedic literature in a way that bolstered indigenous religious pride. Yoga philosophy was looked upon with disregard for supposedly contradicting the Vedas. The Yoga Sūtra fell into oblivion until the text was rediscovered and translated into English by Colebrooke, a British colonist, in the early 1800s.

**Experiential Origins**

Social and cultural circumstances during this time opened the door for a broad range of practices, collectively called *tantra*, to develop. Mantra (chanting sacred hymns) to ward off evil, acquire superhuman powers, and/or to commune with the divine represents the main form of tantric practice (p. 112), followed by pilgrimage to sacred sites and circumambulatory rites (Bharati, 1975, Sanskrit scholar and the anthropologist who coined the term “pizza effect” described in the Sociocultural Context chapter). Believed by proponents to be more powerful
than the traditions espoused in earlier philosophical treatises, tantric practices were largely experiential (rather than text-based) and were conducted in the local vernacular (instead of classical Sanskrit), making them widely accessible. As a result, they wielded greater influence across the South Asian subcontinent than earlier yogic teachings (Sanderson, 1990, p. 128).

Tantra is often considered a branch of *hatha* yoga, which encompasses a broad array of body-oriented practices developed by ascetic renunciants, cloistered monks, and members of various religious sects and social groups (Mallinson, 2012). Scholars at the Hatha Yoga Project at the School of African and Oriental Sciences at the University of London are currently involved in a five-year project to travel through India to rediscover, translate into English, and archive important *hatha* texts to which the origins of many of today’s yoga postures can be traced (Birch & Hargreaves, 2019; Mallinson & Singleton, 2017), thus expanding the body of literature available to contemporary practitioners and scholars.

Although yoga philosophy and the experiential, body-oriented practices of *hatha* yoga originated separately, modern yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar (1918-2014) models the synthesizing features of Indian philosophy (as described by Radhakrishnan, 1957) in his work to fashion a modern conception of yoga that joins both strands. In his groundbreaking work, *Light on Yoga*, Iyengar writes:

> As a mountaineer needs ladders, ropes and crampons as well as physical fitness and discipline to climb the icy peaks of the Himalayas, so does the yoga aspirant need the knowledge and discipline of *hatha* yoga to reach the heights the classical yoga dealt with by Patañjali. This [combined] path is the fountain for the other three paths [knowledge, action, and devotion]. It brings calmness and tranquility and prepares the mind for the absolute unqualified self-surrender to God in which all these four paths merge into one. (Iyengar, 1977, p. 23)

---

28 James Mallinson is considered the world’s leading authority on the history of *hatha* yoga traditions. He is the principal investigator of the Haṭha Yoga Project at the University of London.
Contemporary Expressions of Yoga

The modern age of yoga began in the mid-1800s, at which time yoga was presented in the West primarily as a spiritual path by prominent Transcendentalists, Theosophists, and visiting Indian Swami Vivekananda. Ralph Waldo Emerson launched the 1857 inaugural issue of the periodical, *The Atlantic*, with a poem based on his appreciation of the Bhagavad Gītā (Vipin & Sharma, 2012). Influenced by Emerson, Henry David Thoreau also embraced yogic literature, reporting in a letter, “Depend upon it that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully…To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi” (Thoreau & Sanborn, 1982, p. 175).

A few decades later, Madame Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophists became acquainted with Indian Swami Vivekananda when he addressed the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and, together, they promoted yoga as a spiritual pursuit while shunning the physical components of the practice, denigrating them as inferior to the study of and devotion to the texts (Syman, 2010; White, 2014). In contrast, well-known yoga pioneers Tirumali Krishnamāchārya, Indra Devi, and B.K.S. Iyengar did the opposite by downplaying yoga’s religious and spiritual contexts when introducing it to Western audiences in the early 1900s (Desai, 2004). To avoid alienating their fledgling foreign student base, they instead presented yoga as a secular physical discipline to promote health and wellbeing. These modern yoga pioneers developed the postural regimens they taught from the *ḥaṭha* yoga teachings they had

---

29 While these pioneers may have introduced yoga as a physical discipline, it was likely part of a deliberate pedagogical approach to gradually reveal yoga’s more esoteric aspects. For example, Iyengar’s extensive writings, as well as manuscripts by others on his method, document how he incrementally incorporated yoga philosophy into his teaching. In his influential work, *Light on Yoga* (1977), Iyengar states the importance of modern postural practice as a stepping-stone to spiritual enlightenment.
been exposed to, but they also borrowed from other forms of physical culture, including weightlifting, gymnastics, Scandinavian calisthenics, military exercises, and Indian mallakhamb (pole sport) (Alter, 2004; Desai, 2004; Singleton, 2010).

In pre-Independence India, *hatha* yoga was often perceived by educated Indian anglophiles largely as a pastime for charlatans and social outcasts. Literally associated with highway robbery (since they controlled trade routes in Northern India), some militant yoga factions resorted to mendicancy and showmanship when British colonial interests forced them out of business. Some became circus performers who demonstrated contortionist tricks or bizarre feats such as eating glass or sleeping on a bed of nails. European scholars studying yoga history and philosophy during this period tended to “admire what they saw as the rational, philosophical, and contemplative aspects of yoga while condemning the obnoxious behavior and queer ascetic practices of the yogis themselves” (Singleton, 2010, p. 33).

Funded by wealthy nationalists to dispel this notion and instead feature yoga as part of Indian’s indigenous cultural heritage, Swami Kuvalayananda (*aka* Jagannath G. Gune), opened The Kaivalyadhama Health and Yoga Research Center to generate evidence to legitimize yoga as a respected medical science (Alter, 2004; Broad, 2012; White, 2009). Published in *Yoga Mimamsa*, a scientific journal he also founded, Kuvalayananda’s studies on oxygen consumption, heart rate, and other physiological functions drew attention and respect from scientists from several major American universities, including Columbia and Yale. The Kaivalyadhama Center remains in operation today.

*From Counterculture to Cultural Phenomenon*

From its introduction in the 1800s until the 1970s, yoga in the United States existed on the fringes of society, engaged in mainly by counterculture iconoclasts. Since then, however, it
has been elevated to a popular cultural phenomenon (Schultz, 2013). Indeed, signs of yoga abound in mainstream culture, at turns positioning it as a system of alternative or complementary healthcare (Birdee et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2013), as a component of a wellness-oriented lifestyle that supports a $16 billion industry (America, 2016; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Jain, 2016; Roy, 2010; White, 2012), and as an emerging transdisciplinary academic field. Underlying these representations is a somewhat older and still widespread view of yoga as a New Age-inspired system offering pathways to both practical forms of healing (such as managing stress or recovering from an injury) and mystical forms of spiritual engagement (Albanese, 2007; De Michelis, 2004; Hanegraaff, 1998).

Henrichsen-Schrembs (2011) present a typology to profile the ways modern people might engage with yoga. The practitioner who initially pursues yoga for health-oriented reasons is tagged as a “pragmatist.” In contrast, others who practice yoga to foster self-development and psychological well-being could be categorized as “explorers.” “Self-helpers” use yoga as a form of therapy, while “mystics” adopt yoga as a lifestyle and worldview (p. 7). According to Stuart Sarbacker (2014), a professor of Indic religions at Oregon State University, yoga currently enjoys such global popularity because its packaging as a physical-oriented health system “collapses the spiritual into the physical,” therefore appealing to today’s fitness-minded populace (p. 106).

Yoga for Health

A 2007 survey conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health identified yoga as one of the top ten alternative health approaches used by adults in the

---

30 Transdisciplinary research incorporates ideas and perspectives from a variety of disciplines and seeks to produce knowledge with real-world application (Leavy, 2011).
CAN YOGA HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE? 89

United States (Barnes et al., 2008). A variety of current studies seek to measure how contemplative practices like yoga might contribute to measurable changes in brain function and to support the growth of positive personal habits and behavior. For example, studies have found that yoga can help to alleviate symptoms of depression (Streeter et al., 2017) and manage the discomfort and limited mobility associated with osteoarthritis (Callahan et al., 2009; Moonaz et al., 2015). These findings point to potential benefits to be gained by integrating yoga more fully into mainstream interventions to help prevent and/or treat the causes and symptoms of health-related pain and suffering. Research studies, however, are not without limitations. Investigators acknowledge the challenges associated with efforts to definitively attribute positive changes in health solely to yoga interventions. They also cite the need to replicate results with larger sample sizes, according to health correspondent Juliz Belluz (2015), who also observes that a lack of uniformity in the types of yoga (i.e. vigorous flow yoga, gentle or restorative practice, alignment-based physical therapy-like approaches, meditative and devotional modes, etc.) employed across studies can impede advocates’ ability to make broad claims about the efficacy of yoga interventions.

**Yoga as Wellness Oriented Lifestyle**

Representations of yoga in today’s world are ubiquitous, from Smithsonian exhibits showcasing its development in India and subsequent adoption by contemporary practitioners across the globe (Diamond, 2014) to television ads for insurance (YouTube.com, 2015). Revenues from sales of yoga apparel, equipment, and experiences ranging from weekly classes at the Y to expensive retreats in exotic locales support a $16 billion industry in the United States (America, 2016), situating contemporary yoga squarely within consumer culture according to religious scholar, Andrea Jain (2015).
Yoga Studies as Academic Discipline

In addition to hosting the Hatha Yoga Project described above, the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) offers a master’s degree program in the traditions of meditation and yoga. Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Naropa University in northern California and the University of Venice, Italy, offer similar degree programs in “yoga studies.” As the result of a joint ventures between the two nations, in 2016 the degree-granting India-China Yoga College was established at Yunnan Minzu University in China to train yoga teachers. Lesley University runs several undergraduate courses on yoga theory, culture, and practice, the psychology of yoga, and yoga for mental health. The Journal of Yoga Studies (JoYS), a peer-reviewed, open access e-journal, and the first scholarly journal dedicated solely to yoga, launched its inaugural issue in 2018.

Yoga and New Age Thought

Popular in the United States from the “Age of Aquarius” in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970-80s, the New Age\(^{31}\) can be considered a movement, a spiritual system or religion, a philosophy, and/or worldview encompassing a vaguely-defined and loosely related collection of alternative, esoteric ideas, and practices especially concerned with mysticism. New Age thought borrows liberally from Eastern religions and philosophy (among other sources) which are “trimmed and refashioned” to fit into a western context and then interpreted in a self-help way (Hanegraaff, 1998, p. 462; Kemp, 2004, pp. 1-2; Michals, 2001).

According to religious scholar Catherine Albanese (2007), New Age-oriented Americans reinvented Eastern wisdom systems to align with metaphysical concerns around unity between

\(^{31}\) The roots of New Age thought can be traced to Transcendentalism and Theosophy (Albanese, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1998).
individual awareness and a notion of collective consciousness, physical movement and energy, and a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing. Yoga got swept up in this mix, contributing to popular perception of it as a mystical, healing system that relies on magic and an influx of divine energy to bring about “desired and seeming miraculous change in adherents’ lives” (pp. 4-5). This framing of yoga as a mystical system from the Orient can undermine efforts to establish modern yoga as a viable health intervention and also inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate an Orientalist discourse that positions Eastern philosophy and practices as inferior to evidence-based occidental counterparts (Said, 1978). This, in turn, can lead to charges of cultural appropriation.

In 2010 the non-governmental Hindu American Foundation (HAF) initiated a campaign to “Take Back Yoga” (Vitello, 2010). The campaign addressed what HAF described as unknowing and/or disrespectful appropriation of Hindu religious symbols by modern yoga practitioners. The organization advocated rectifying the situation by introducing mandatory basic education for American yoga teachers on the religious and cultural underpinnings of yoga, according to Hindu perspectives. The topic of cultural appropriation surfaced again in the media in 2015, this time stimulated by the cancelation of a yoga class at the University of Ottawa because of claims that yoga originated in a culture that had suffered as the result of “colonialism and western supremacy” (Goldberg, 2015). This incident led to a flurry of scholarly and popular inquiry into cultural appropriation as it relates to yoga (ahuja, 2014; Appiah, 2018; Facts, n.d.; Miller, 2015, 2016; Nittle, 2019). One area of concern is the degree to which zeal for yoga-oriented cultural or spiritual practices outstrips knowledge about the traditions themselves and

32 HAF’s website no longer features references to the “Take Back Yoga” initiative but does contain helpful resources to provide background on yoga and related traditions in India.
leads to inappropriate integration of cultural elements, not all of which are specifically yoga-related (e.g., painting Hindu markings on one’s forehead or dressing in traditional South Asian apparel).

**Yoga for Spiritual Growth**

In addition to research on the health benefits of yoga, industry surveys (America, 2016) and research studies (Park et al., 2016) conducted in the United States indicate that practitioners’ motivations for practicing yoga evolve over time away from health aims toward more spiritual ones. Studies undertaken in Germany and the United Kingdom report similar findings (Bussing, Hedstuck, et al., 2012; Ivtnz & Jegatheeswaran, 2014). Büssing, Ostermann and Matthiessen (2012; 2007), who research expressions of spirituality at the University of Witten/Herdecke in Germany, define spirituality as a search for meaning and purpose in life, awareness of a divine being, and connection with others and nature (p. 284). From this definition, they developed a tool to measure seven aspects of spirituality (see Table 5) which they then administered to 191 individuals enrolled in a two-year yoga teacher training program in Germany. Their findings show that an intensive yoga practice may significantly increase practitioners’ spiritual inclinations, but that such inclinations are dependent on one’s original spiritual/religious self-perception.

A similar study in the United Kingdom, which used its own questionnaire (not the one developed by Büssing et al.), found that spiritual intention among the study’s 235 respondents increased over time and was linked to greater feelings of psychological wellbeing, leading the researchers to conclude that yoga has the potential to cultivate opportunities for spiritual growth (Ivtzan & Jegatheeswaran, 2014). Yet another qualitative analysis conducted in the United States, led by nurse-scientist and certified Iyengar yoga teacher, Alyson Ross (2014), found that
practitioners believe that yoga makes them more patient, kind, mindful and self-aware. They credit these qualities with not only improving their interpersonal relationships but also enhancing spiritual transformation.

Table 6 Aspects of Spirituality (Büssing, Ostermann and Matthiessen, (2007)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Prayer, trust in God and shelter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Insight, awareness and wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Transcendence conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Compassion, generosity and patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Conscious interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Gratitude, reverence and respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Equanimity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presbyterian pastor and author Marjorie Thompson (2014) notes that spiritual discipline can lead to self-awareness, truthfulness, humility, and compassion, all of which are reflected in Table 5 above and also are discussed in ancient yogic texts. For example, verse I.33 of the Yoga Sūtra reads, “through cultivation of friendliness, compassion, joy, and indifference to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice, the consciousness becomes favorably disposed, serene, and benevolent” (Iyengar, 1996). Elsewhere in the Yoga Sūtra, verse II.36 emphasizes the importance of honesty, and verses I.30 and II.3 counsel humility. Both the Bhagavad Gītā and the Yoga Sūtra emphasize the importance of cultivating self-awareness, or svādhyāya, as suggested in item #2. Verse II.48 of the Bhagavad Gītā states, simply, that “yoga is equanimity” (Mitchell, 2000).
Yoga and Adult Education

The concept of adult education as a discrete field of inquiry in the United States is generally attributed to Eduard Lindeman, a contemporary of John Dewey, who published *The Meaning of Adult Education* in 1926. Both Lindeman and Dewey were interested in the emancipatory effects of adult education and considered it a way to foment social change (Smith, 2020), an idea also advanced by German philosopher and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas. Adult education scholar Stephen Brookfield (2005) writes that Habermas considered adult learning as “the engine of social change.”

Along with commitment to social change, concern for spiritual development also figures prominently in the recent history of adult education in the United States. Adult education expert Leona English (2005) refers to social change and spirituality as the twin pillars of adult education, noting the “link between a strong interior life and a justice orientation” is central to the history, mission, and future of adult education in the United States (pp.1169-1170). She emphasizes the important role adult education plays in “bridging the divide between the personal and the collective to diminish polarities such as inner versus outer spirituality…and reaching outward and striving for a just and peaceful world in a way that fully engages the individual with the social contract (p. 1171), thus supporting the present study’s inquiry into yoga as a form of adult education that inspires both individual spiritual inclinations as well as the cosmopolitan desire to do good in the world.

The relationship between these two forms of personal growth can be depicted visually through a series of concentric circles, an illustration frequently employed by political philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her writings on cosmopolitanism, and whose origin can be traced to Stoic philosopher Hierocles (Nussbaum, 1994, 1997a; Nussbaum, 2019; Pigliucci,
2016, 2019). According to English (2005), “Nussbaum (2000) sees the complex interaction of culture, religion, and social change on the world stage and she understands the need to probe this interaction and intersection as a way to understand global problems and solutions” (p. 1175).

Tisdell (1999, 2008) acknowledges that adults often describe their spiritual process as one of questioning or moving away from earlier beliefs or experiences, while exploring other ways of being through education or life experiences related to cognitive and moral development. The process results in a commitment to the inner reflection required to live according to one’s life purpose, and to outer action, or a sense of communal responsibility (pp. 33-34). This framing relates to at least two recognized theories of adult learning: the self-directed learning associated with andragogy and the transformative learning that occurs when adults critically reflect on previously unexamined assumptions about the world.

According to Darkenwald and Merriam (1982, as cited in Smith, 2020), adult education is concerned with helping adults to live more successfully by providing opportunities to increase competence, or negotiate transitions, in their social roles (worker, parent, retiree etc.), to help them gain greater fulfilment in their personal lives, and to assist them in solving personal and community problems. In the late 1960s, Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the field of adult learning, popularized the concept of andragogy (“the art and science of helping adults learn”) to characterize this mode of learning. Sometimes considered more a set of principles than a full-fledged theory, andragogy posits that adults are self-directed learners who seek to learn what they need to know to solve a problem. They draw on an accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid new learning, need to know why they are learning something, and are motivated to learn by internal, rather than external, factors (TEAL, 2011). Knowles defined self-
directed learning as a process whereby learners take control of the mechanics and techniques of teaching themselves a particular subject (Dunlap et al., 2012).

Critical theorists discounted Knowles’ work because they believed it ignores ways of learning outside of institutional settings and also fails to take into account the sociocultural and political contexts in which education takes place (Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 83-104). For example, Brookfield (2003, as cited by TEAL, 2011) called andragogy "culture blind," for neglecting the ways people from diverse races and cultures may value a teacher as the primary source of knowledge and therefore may not be familiar with or inclined toward self-directed learning.

Transformative learning, as put forth by sociologist Jack Mezirow, is a complex framework that itself has transformed from its development in the 1980s to the 2000s. Initially inspired by Habermas’ ideas around the importance of understanding the adult learning process as a critical component in creating a more just democratic society, Mezirow developed a theory to look at how critical reflection on ideological norms and behaviors internalized uncritically in childhood might lead to the transformation of meaning structures and schemes in adulthood (Brookfield, 2005). Mezirow’s theory proceeds from the basis that adults resist learning anything that doesn’t conform with the meaning structures developed in childhood, that is until a “disorienting dilemma” challenges them to critically reflect on the assumptions inherent in existing meaning structures. Transformative learning occurs when adults refine or elaborate on existing meaning structures, or learn new ones, based on the reflection triggered by the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1994).

Andragogy and transformative learning offer useful lenses through which to consider yoga as a form of adult education pursued in response to a disorienting dilemma, such as a back
injury, the breakup of a marriage, or the loss of a job. The adult who takes up yoga to deal with these occurrences may do so initially to solve a problem – ease the back discomfort, soothe the emotional pain associated with the breakup, or manage the anxiety related to losing a job. They may find that, in addition to solving the immediate problem, their involvement with yoga prompts them to challenge preconceptions or established modes of behavior (their physical posture, their interactions with their partner, how well the lost job reflects their life’s purpose). From this, they may experience some degree of personal transformation that prompts them to consider yoga as a means for fostering critical reflection about themselves and the world, as well as a method for solving immediate problems.

Development psychologist Robert Kegan’s Adult Constructive-Developmental theory (ACD) (as explained in Drago-Severson, 2008; Kegan, 2000) offers a framework to understand how Mezirow’s version of transformative learning might lead to developmental changes in adults (Snyder, 2008). A constructivist model, ACD is based on the idea that ways of knowing that shape how we make meaning transform through stages, beginning with a self-centered, rules-based instrumental stage and moving along to a transformative stage where we are able to navigate uncertainty and become adept at self-reflection (Drago-Severson, 2008; Kegan, 2000; Stewart & Wolodko).

Adult education literature reflects a growing number of attempts to broaden Western rationalist, positivist ways of knowing. Feminist interpretations, queer theory, and non-Western perspective add depth and richness to understanding adult development and meaning-making processes (Ziegahn & Mehra, 2006). In particular, non-Western religions, philosophies, and cultural practices not only include ways of learning that are not prevalent in the Western literature, but also expand on the concept of what constitutes knowledge and how it is
constructed. Although grouping together ways of knowing from diverse cultures into one
catchall “non-Western” category can come across as reductive, adult learning experts recognize
common themes across systems, such as interdependence, communal learning, and holism. Non-
Western forms of education tend to take place throughout the lifespan and are delivered outside
of formal institutional settings (Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008), a profile reflected in modern urban
areas where adults of all ages typically begin their yoga journeys by enrolling in classes offered
at studios and other venues, such as adult education centers and health clubs.

A valuable theoretical framework on its own merits, the _panchakoshas_ (five sheaths;
often referred to simply as the “koshas”) described in the _Taittiriya Upanishad_ (TU) as a “model
of the human being encased in five wrappings,” starting from the physical body and progressing
inward (Easwaran & Nagler, 2007, p. 241; Raina, 2016), has been used by researchers to study
subjects ranging from human resource development to creativity. Describing the _koshas_ as a
aspect of Indian philosophy that “combines cognition and spirituality,” psychology professors at
the University of Bangalore used the framework to study ways to manage stress and motivation
in the workplace (Ashok & Thimmappa, 2006). Likewise, Maharaj Raina, a retired professor
from the National Council of Educational Research and Training in New Delhi, used the _koshas_
as a conceptual construct to examine connections between consciousness and creativity.

Although they do not cover the _koshas_ specifically, Zieghan and Mehra (2006) presented
a paper at the 2006 Adult Education and Research Conference to advocate for the inclusion of
frameworks that present a more holistic and integral view of matter and spirit. They featured
Integral Yoga (originated by Indian nationalist, scholar, and spiritual leader _Sri Aurobindo_) as a
dynamic system of thought and practice emphasizes a discipline of self-inquiry and self-
development. Often depicted as a series of concentric circles that begin with basic human
functions (such as eating) and then encompass increasing subtle human experiences such as breath and energy, analysis, intuition, and bliss, the ideas represented by the koshas are consistent with Zieghan and Mehra’s work. The koshas also capture ideas that are compatible with cosmopolitanism.

**Figure 3** The Panchakoshas (five sheaths of human existence)

---

**Cosmopolitan Aspects of Yoga**

The dominant representation of yoga in the public domain as a postural practice that confers mental and physical health benefits on the individual practitioner often overshadows aspects of yoga that extend beyond the individual practitioner, such as the call to do good in the world as espoused in the Bhagavad Gītā, reiterated by some modern yoga pioneers, and reflected in the adult education motives outlined above. For example, B.K.S. Iyengar refers to yoga as a “universal culture,” in which the practitioner engages in spiritual practices not only for personal development but also to promote growth of the local community and larger society. Reflective of the concentric circle model of cosmopolitanism first put forth by Hierocles (Nussbaum, 1994,
1997a; Nussbaum, 2019; Pigliucci, 2019), Iyengar states that yoga should ripple out from the “individual to the community, and from the community to the society (Iyengar, 1989, pp. 10-11). Figure 4 Concentric Circles of Cosmopolitan Concern, Attributed to Stoic Philosopher Hierocles

Iyengar’s own significant philanthropic projects, and those of some of his long-term students, align with his teachings on how yoga should be done for all of society. In addition to his significant efforts to disseminate yogic teachings around the world (Joseph, 2015) and for developing protocols to use postural yoga therapeutically to help people recover from and manage illness and injury, Iyengar established the Smaraka Nidhi Trust in 2003 to improve the quality of life for residents of his native village Bellur, in Karnataka, India. The trust supported the construction of and funds ongoing operations for a school and hospital, a temple, a yoga institute, and community projects such as tree-planting. Iyengar was a three-time recipient of Padma awards. Established in 1954, the Padma program recognizes civilians for public service. Most recently, Iyengar received the Padma Vibhushan (second highest honor) in 2014.

A devoted student of B.K.S. Iyengar for decades, Catholic priest Fr. Joe Pereira founded the Kripa Foundation in Mumbai in 1981 to offer care, support, and rehabilitation for people
affected by chemical dependency and HIV/AIDS. Kripa is the largest NGO in India working in this field, with 21 centers around India and aspirations to spread globally. According to the Foundation’s website, its philosophy reflects of the spirit of service enshrined in the work of Mother Teresa, and its holistic treatment model uses Iyengar Yoga to help patients restore and rejuvenate their own healing powers. Fr. Joe has been recognized within Indian and internationally for his work. He has been the recipient of the 2009 Padma Shri award (third highest national honor) and a Lifetime Achievement Award in the field of Addiction and HIV AIDS (2014). Among other places, his work is featured in the film, *Iyengar: The Man, Yoga, and the Student’s Journey*.

In the public sector, the government of India is involved in a number of large-scale domestic and multilateral efforts to feature yoga as a way to promote global harmony and peace, as depicted in the logo created for the annual International Day of Yoga (see Figure 5). For example, the newly revamped Indian *Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH)* has been charged with implementing yoga programs throughout India. Its 54-page Common Yoga Protocol. Published in 2017, the protocol defines yoga, provides basic guidelines for postural practice and offers a few routines, and summarizes government-sponsored yoga events. The document lists 21 yoga experts (including a representative from the Iyengar Institute in Pune) who were consulted to help develop the Protocol (p. viii), an approach that must continue, according to Prashant Iyengar (personal conversation, January 2019) in order to guarantee that the vast array of yoga traditions currently active in India are involved in future efforts to design and disseminate government-sponsored yoga initiatives.

Figure 5 United Nations International Day of Yoga Logo
The Indian government’s proposal to adopt June 21st as an annual International Day of Yoga (IDY) was endorsed by 175 member-states at the 69th United Nations General Assembly in December 2014. In his remarks to the Assembly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the benefits of yoga not only for health and spiritual awareness but, interestingly, also as a way to address the challenges of climate change:

Yoga is an invaluable gift of ancient Indian tradition. It embodies unity of mind and body, thought and action, restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature and a holistic approach to health and well-being. Yoga is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with ourselves, the world and Nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us to deal with climate change. Let us work towards adopting an International Day of Yoga. (India, 2017)

Neither the U.N. or the Indian government have furnished evidence or even a clear explanation for how yoga might accomplish these impressive feats. Yet their undeniable appeal argues in favor of research to consider how the inner peace and spiritual inclinations that yoga practitioners experience might somehow ripple out into the world, leading to individual and large-scale action to address some of today’s intractable global problems. As verse III.38 of the Bhagavad Gītā counsels, we should “take any action, no matter how small. Action is far superior to inaction” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 63).

On a smaller scale, private charitable projects are offering yoga in venues as diverse as inner city classrooms (Wiggins, 2011), prisons (Prison Yoga Project), and refugee camps
Among its numerous philanthropic initiatives, the Sab Ka Mangal Ho Foundation has a retail operation near the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India, whose sale of yoga props (such as mats and blocks) support yoga education for children in 20 orphanages in Mumbai and Pune. On the other side of the globe, Iyengar Yoga Association of New England sponsors community service and scholarship programs to share B.K.S. Iyengar’s teachings with individuals and groups (such as victims of domestic violence and trans-gender youth) in New England facing financial or other barriers to signing up for classes. These are just several examples of social action inspired by, or at least connected to, yoga initiatives.

**Theoretical Maṇḍala**

Grounded theory (GT) research seeks to derive emergent theory from data collected and analyzed for a given project. At the same time, GT projects often rely on extant theory within the relevant academic discipline to anchor the study. The knowledge generated aims to refine, extend, challenge, or supersede the anchoring theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 310). Given the interdisciplinary nature of both the individually designed specialization within Lesley’s doctoral program, and this study’s focus within the budding interdisciplinary academic field of yoga studies, I did not have an array of pre-established disciplinary theories to choose from to ground my study. Consequently, this paper discusses theoretical perspectives from several areas: the panchakoshas (five sheaths) outlined in the Taittiriya Upaniṣhads, various adult learning and development models developed in the West, and the concentric circles of cosmopolitanism, also a Western conception.

While these models were developed at different periods in time, for different purposes, each could potentially be used as a theoretical framework to study how involvement with yoga

---

33 Maṇḍala is one of the Sanskrit words for “circle.”
might begin as a pragmatic pursuit employed to address a particular problem being experienced by an individual and, with time, evolve away from focus on the individual self to engagement in the local community into larger and larger circles that encompass concern for all of humanity. I have taken elements from each of these perspectives to develop a unique conceptual framework that blends together eastern philosophy, and western scholarship to present yoga as a timeless and universal pursuit, applicable to all people, at all times, in all cultural and geographic milieu.

For example, the *koshas* represent a process of human experience that moves from the superficial to the sublime, beginning with preoccupation with basic physiological functions and moving toward increasing deeper states of awareness that go beyond one’s physical boundaries and connects with a universal consciousness (Easwaran & Nagler, 2007; Iyengar et al., 2005; Raina, 2016). Kegan’s (2000) Adult Constructivist Development model, similarly, views adult development as starting from a place where concrete rules and directions are needed for an adult to take action, moving progressively toward self-authored states where they are able to discern, reflect, and engage with the world beyond their own individual concerns. And, since the time of the Stoics, cosmopolitanism has been described as an outlook that “devote[s] oneself simultaneously to the local and larger human community” (Hansen, p. 7).

*“Around every circle another can be drawn”*

The *koshas* and cosmopolitanism are often visually represented as series of concentric circles (Choudhury, n.d.; Easwaran & Nagler, 2007; Iyengar et al., 2005; Nussbaum, 1997a, 1997b; Nussbaum, 2019; Pigliucci, 2016). Although I have not come across this in the literature, it seems that Kegan’s Adult Constructivist Development (ACD) theory also could be represented in a circular pattern, perhaps illustrating Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1841) observation that “the natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles…around every circle
another can be drawn.” Emerson drew inspiration from the natural world, describing it as a vehicle to connect with the divine and thereby cultivate intuitive ways of knowing. In his 1841 essay, *Circles*, he conjectures that both the forces of nature and the unlimited depths to which human understanding can penetrate can be represented by concentric circles. Individual sets of circles can overlap with others, suggesting that multiple schools of thought may endorse similar principles or goals and coexist peacefully (Emerson, 1836; Nichols, 2006). In Figure 6, I attempt to integrate the components of the *koshas* and ACD into one, enhanced set of cosmopolitanism concentric circles, or “*manḍala.*”
Figure 6 Enhanced Cosmopolitan Maṇḍala

The model depicting the panchakoshas is sometimes shown with the annamaya kosha, the least subtle sheath relating to the physical body on the outside of the circle, with each increasing subtle sheath moving inward to the core. It is possible to flip the model, so that the annamaya kosha appears as the innermost, or smaller sheath, rippling outward toward more expansiveness. Similarly, the cosmopolitan model of concentric circles is generally described with the individual self in the center, with the goal of pulling all of humanity closer. It could also be understood as a process of individual engagement with the world emanating outward.
I have employed the “enhanced cosmopolitan mandala” to organize and analyze findings from the data collected for this project. While the enhanced mandala I offer incorporates ideas from the koshas and the Adult Constructivist Development model, I draw heavily on the cosmopolitan model that seeks to capture how individual spiritual exercises can lead not only to personal growth but to concern for making the world a better place.

**Cosmopolitanism’s Roots**

Modern scholarship traces the birth of cosmopolitan discourse to Diogenes the Cynic (412-323 BCE) of ancient Greece who declared himself a “citizen of the world” despite rarely leaving the earthen tub in the town center that was his home (Hansen, 2011; Pigliucci, 2016). Had he lived in modern times, Diogenes likely would have been part of the 1960s counterculture movement that “turned on, tuned in, dropped out.” When Alexander the Great asked him if he could do anything for him, Diogenes replied, “yes, stand aside; you’re keeping the sun off me” (Malcomson, 1998, p. 233). According to Nussbaum (1994, 1997b: 2019), Diogenes followed Socrates’ lead in disdaining external markers of status and focusing instead on the inner life of virtue and thought. He defined himself in terms of universal, rather than solely local, affiliations.

Nussbaum notes that little is known about the Cynical stance on cosmopolitanism beyond accounts of Diogenes’ public rejection of social convention. Stoic philosophers (Zeno, Seneca, Hierocles, Marcus Aurelius) are credited with developing the viewpoint. They argued that it was possible to “devote oneself simultaneously to the local and larger human community” (Hansen, p. 7). Stoics believed that “the good citizen is a citizen of the world.” They observed that thinking about humanity is valuable for self-knowledge because we see our customs and ourselves more clearly when we see our own ways in relation to those of others (Nussbaum, 1997a, p. 59).
Stoic Cosmopolitanism ended with the Christianization of Rome. Most chronological accounts of cosmopolitanism in the West generally jump next to Kant’s work during the Enlightenment, but traces of Stoic contributions appear in the interim (Brown & Held, 2010, p. 3). Kant believed that natural law obliges us to develop the innate capacities of all humans and, to attain this goal, a civil society is needed to preside over “perpetual peace,” a term he borrowed from a Dutch tavern sign with a burial ground painted on it (Hansen, 2011, p. 71). Often criticized for holding naïve views on the feasibility of a world government, Kant’s work nevertheless influenced the creation of the League of Nations and later the United Nations (Brown & Held, 2010, pp. 15 and 57-58). Centuries later, the Dalai Lama espoused similar thought:

The new reality is that everyone is interdependent with everyone else. The United States is a leading nation of the free world. For this reason, I call on its president to think more about global-level issues. There are no national boundaries for climate protection or the global economy. No religious boundaries, either. The time has come to understand that we are the same human beings on this planet. Whether we want to or not, we must coexist. (Gyatso, 2017)

**Cosmopolitanism Theory**

Interest in cosmopolitanism throughout Western history coincides with periods of dramatic societal change brought about by various aspects of globalization, including shifting conceptions of national sovereignty, wide-scale migration, and technological advancements (Fischer, 2007). In Stoic times, this was marked by the expansion of the Greek and later the Roman Empires. Kant wrote “Perpetual Peace” during the years of the French Revolution. Political theorist Fred Dallmayr credits the longevity of both Stoic and Kant’s work to their ability to “transcend confining contexts and parochial interests and to keep their gaze fixed on that rational core that is shared by people at all times and in all places” (2003, pp. 424-426).
The contemporary period of cosmopolitan scholarship began in the early 1990s after the Cold War ended (Brown & Held, 2010, p. 15). Much of the literature I’ve reviewed for this dissertation was written between 1990 and 2010, after which time the release of new works seems to have slowed. One of the few recent publications I located is Giri’s (2018) *Beyond Cosmopolitanism: Towards Planetary Transformations*. According to the author, the book, embraces multiple trajectories and conceptions of being cosmopolitan in our world, such as in the Indic traditions where to be cosmopolitan is to realize oneself as a member of the family of Earth, and in the Chinese tradition being one and all under heaven. (Giri, 2018)

Both in his 2018 title and earlier writings, Giri (2006) censures contemporary discourse on cosmopolitanism for being Euro-American and parochial. Similarly, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013) makes the point that cosmopolitanism is neither a Western invention nor a Western privilege (p. 259). Giri suggests that the well-known concentric circle framework be supplemented with a system of overlapping circles to include contributions to cosmopolitanism thinking from scholars such as Japanese thinker Tsunesbauro Makiguchi whose work inspired the spiritual movement of Soka Gokkai35 (p. 1280), as well as the work of Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Indian independence-movement leader Mahatma Gandhi, and Indian nationalist, poet, and spiritual guru Sri Aurobindo.

Cosmopolitanism is neither theory nor discrete discipline. It is a contested term with no uniform interpretation in the growing literature (Beck & Sznaider, 2006). Education professor Sharon Todd points out that the “scholarly community has not settled on a single definition of the term and is unlikely to do so” (Todd, 2009, p. 15). Political philosopher Victoria Costa

35 Soka Gokkai is led by Daisaku Ikeda, a peacebuilder, Buddhist philosopher, educator, author, poet, and founder of several international institutions promoting peace, culture and education, he has dedicated himself to bolstering the foundations of a lasting culture of peace. [https://www.daisakuikeda.org/](https://www.daisakuikeda.org/)
observes that there is “no precise set of normative claims that unify all cosmopolitan positions” (2005, p. 250) and Hansen notes that this is because “empirical research on cosmopolitanism remains sufficiently new and unmapped” (2011, p. 76).

According to Hansen (2014), “cosmopolitanism represents not only a theoretical outlook about life but a philosophy for and of life” (p.3). It signifies a way of expanding horizons, being in the world, and constructing an identity (Mehta, 2000, p. 620) and a mode of managing meaning (Hannerz, 1990). Its spiritual dimension hasn’t received enough attention in dominant western discourses, according to Giri (2006, p. 1288). Because the term encompasses an inclusive and broad range of thought, it defies easy definition. In fact, Hansen (2011) states “when we try to define it in a terminal manner, especially who is and who is not cosmopolitan, we have left the terrain of cosmopolitanism itself” (p. 78).

Vertovec and Cohen (2002) describe the “multi-layered ways that cosmopolitanism has entered our world as representing a philosophy or worldview, a political project to build transnational institutions and/or recognize multiple identifies, a sociocultural condition, a mode of practice or competence, or an attitude or disposition (pp.7-17). These layers are often categorized into political, moral, and cultural cosmopolitanism, where political cosmopolitanism signifies interest in establishing a world political order and moral cosmopolitanism refers to an individual’s allegiance to a shared “commitment to the primacy of world citizenship over all national, religious, cultural, ethnic and other parochial affiliations” (Beck & Sznaiider, 2006). Critics of both political and moral cosmopolitanism dismiss them as naïve outlooks that fail to capture the realities of global politics (Anderson, 1998, pp. 213; 266-267).

Cultural cosmopolitanism refers to global processes in which “new cultural forms take shape and where new spaces of discourse open up leading to a transformation in the social
world” (Delanty, 2006). This term begins to capture the idea of “lived” or “embodied”
cosmopolitanism reflected by increased interdependence among social actors across national
borders (Beck & Sznaider, 2006) and a down-to-earth, localized embodiment of
cosmopolitanism that implies being open reflectively to new persons, ideas, values, and practices
(Hansen, 2014, p. 11).

Volume 57(1) of The British Journal of Sociology (2006) proposed the adoption of
“critical cosmopolitan sociology” to treat cosmopolitanism as situated in a social world
unbounded by the confines of the nation state and instead reflective of today’s globally
interconnected world. Beck and Sznaider (2006) conjecture that cosmopolitan attitudes and
behavior are as much a result of internal developmental processes within the social world as a
function of globalization and therefore warrant inquiry from a sociological perspective. In
discussing the issue, Soysal (2010) equates individual engagement with movements against
global inequality and human rights violations with the behavior of an “actually existing
cosmopolitan,” a term coined by Malcomson in a 1998 essay entitled “The Varieties of
Cosmopolitan Experience.

Indeed, there seem to be as many varieties of cosmopolitan experience as there are
scholarly lenses for analyzing them. Perhaps I’m exhibiting a cosmopolitan tendency myself
when I bristle at fitting my own views and the following analysis into one or several of the
available cosmopolitanism categories or adding to the existing surfeit of terms by creating my
own. At the same time, I am partial to the notion of cosmopolitanism as a lived philosophy
where people’s daily actions demonstrate concern for the world, whether they are meditating or
doing yoga postures, caring for family members, contributing to their local community, or
thinking about global peace and harmony. They may not consciously label their actions or
outlook as “cosmopolitan,” but they are living their lives in a way that reflects cosmopolitan ideals by connecting individual action to something universal.

**Findings**

As outlined in the Methods chapter, analysis of the quantitative data generated by the online survey indicates that yoga practitioners with 16 or more years of experience observe a closer connection between their worldview and yoga practice at almost double the rate than those who have been involved with yoga for fewer than 16 years. Coding of the one open-ended survey question generated three themes, one agreeing that yoga practice helps shape social views and the other observing that respondents’ social justice views predate their involvement with yoga. The third theme to emerge from the survey expressed concern around what respondents called the commercialization of yoga, or the yoga industry.

These themes also emerged in the 15 interviews I conducted with selected survey participants. Additional themes generated by analysis of interview data presented herein are organized according to the four categories of the enhanced cosmopolitanism mandala based on my study of cosmopolitanism, the panchakoshas, and adult learning and development theory: self-development, family, community, and the wider world.

**Self-Development and the Balancing Effects of Yoga**

Interviewees most frequently cited a desire to establish or maintain sanity, clarity, and steadfastness in today’s complex world as the main reason they practice. Respondents perceive yoga as a way to build character strength and to develop the tools to engage fully and productively in the world rather than to retreat from it. They credit yoga with improving not only physical balance but also mental and emotional evenness by helping them to overcome obstacles.

**Table 7** Self-Care Themes

---

*Please note: Table 7 is not visible in the provided text.*
Responding to a disorienting dilemma

Balancing their physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual selves

Engaging in a continuing and deepening learning process

Building physical and character strength

Cultivating self-awareness and acceptance

Overcoming physical, mental, and psychological obstacles

**Responding to a disorienting dilemma**

Six of the 15 interviewees initially came to yoga to respond to a disorienting dilemma in their lives. Disorienting dilemmas, according to adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow (1994), disrupt our normal patterns of being in and understanding the world. Interviewee E.F.’s disorienting dilemma was professional burnout generated by the tough working conditions she faced as a high school English teacher in the Chicago public school system. D.S.’s occurred when he left his job as foreign correspondent and found himself depressed and smoking marijuana at home all day long. N.R. also faced depression when she relocated from Mexico to Boston without her fiancé, to a job she found unsatisfying. L.P.M. needed a reprieve from a chaotic situation at home, and B.C. was diagnosed with HIV at a time when that was equivalent to a death sentence. Three interviewees experienced disorienting dilemmas after they had already been practicing yoga for some time: N.R. and J.S.S. were diagnosed with cancer, and L.J. was the victim of violence committed by an intimate partner.

In each of these cases, the interviewees used yoga to redefine their existing meaning structures, or create new structures (Mezirow, 1994), to adapt to the circumstances surrounding the disorienting dilemma.
**Balancing physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual selves**

J.S.S. and J.S., women in their early 60s, cited postural yoga’s role in supporting good physical balance, thereby reducing the likelihood of injury due to falls. J.S. practices yoga “for a bunch of reasons. As I age, my reasons become more about I'm afraid to fall and shatter to pieces. Likewise, J.S.S. says:

> I originally started yoga because I had the beginnings of osteoporosis or osteopenia. My mother was quite stooped over and I looked at her one day and thought, “holy moly, that's going to be me,” and I didn't want it to be. So that was the sort of precipitating event. I've continued to do yoga partly for my posture but also for strength and flexibility. Otherwise, I think my [physical] infrastructure would crumble. And as I get older, for balance, and because I like the meditative aspect of it.

At the other end of the age spectrum, G.A.D., the youngest interviewee in the study, described her efforts to organize her postural practice around her menstrual cycle to balance hormonal shifts. Interviewees also shed light on how yoga can help promote balance in more than just physical ways. J.S. credits yoga with making her “more of an even human being.” B.M., a poet in her 60s who describes herself as more of a “mind person than a body person,” feels that yoga is helping her to establish balance between body and mind. In the past, she considered the body simply as a vehicle for “carrying around the head, the seat of intellect.” B.C. reflects that yoga has helped him balance out a tendency to put 150% of his effort into new endeavors and instead divide his time and energy evenly across all of his life pursuits.

**Engaging in a continuing and deepening learning process**

As a yoga teacher, G.D. learns something new every day through her teaching. She noted that the point of teaching is not, “to go out to show the world what we know” but rather to engage in an ongoing learning process. She quoted B.K.S. Iyengar’s well-known advice to “always be a learner.” B.C.’s experience reflects this sentiment. Although he was trained to teach
the Kripalu style of yoga, he continues to explore and learn immensely from other schools and says:

I've been kind of blown away at how we can keep changing and evolving way beyond what I expected earlier in life...yoga taught me to think lifelong versus in terms of decades or months or years. That was a big shift for me because we live in such an immediate world that having the perspective of decades or a lifetime changes how one lives.

D.S. uses postural practice and intellectual inquiry “to integrate and make embodied sense of [yogic] ideas.” In this pursuit, D.S. has explored the Iyengar and Ashtanga systems of postural practice, obtained a master’s degree in yoga studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and is writing a “practical guidebook to yoga philosophy,” soon to be published by North Point Press.

E.F. feels that her cumulative experiences to date have led her to what she considers her life’s work – teaching yoga and Ayurveda. After J.S. had been practicing postural yoga for a while and was introduced to the Iyengar method, she,

realized there was more to yoga than just āsana practice and became interested in a different way. Yoga encourages a deeper experience of feeling and learning that encourages me to work with a “whole new awareness that I really like.

**Building physical and character strength**

All interviewees expressed appreciation for the increase in physical strength and overall wellbeing they derive from their postural practice. B.M. feels virtuous and accomplished after engaging in what she calls the “enlightened torture” of a typical yoga class. S.G., J.S.S. and K.D. noted growing technical expertise that allows them to use their practice diagnostically to identify areas of physical or mental disquiet and then follow a sequence of postures to ease the discomfort. Until last year, G.A.D. was “obsessed with the physical aspects of yoga poses,” but has come to understand that yoga is more for cultivating the mind than providing a physical
workout. She says, “if you think the goal of yoga is limited to the physical, you'll be stuck in the
glue forever attaching you to your body.” L.J. credits the physical practice with opening up a
“pathway into an experience with the ineffable soul that she doesn’t think she could've gotten to
by just thinking or reading about it.”

B.C. and G.D. both used the term “character strength” to describe how they feel their
practice has support their personal and spiritual growth. According to G.D., “when we’re young
and naïve, the world is open. As we mature, a different understanding sets in and we learn that
we have developed the strength and courage to face the reality of daily life.”

**Cultivating self-awareness and acceptance**

All interviewees shared the belief that yoga helps them to be more comfortable with
themselves. B.M., J.S.S., and J.S. mentioned this in the context of learning to be OK when
they’re not able to fully execute physically demanding postures, especially if they had been able
to do them at a younger age. L.J. observes that yoga helped her to recognize that self-worth
comes from inside, not from external markers. G.AD. believes that continued practice has helped
to erode the fear of injuring herself by doing poses “incorrectly.” She now realizes that one
wrong move won’t land her in the emergency room, and that practice of any discipline inevitably
includes making mistakes. Thoughtfully skeptical throughout our interview, D.S. is not sure if
“yoga does all its claims to do, but it has given me an awareness that I can watch my mind.”

**Overcoming physical, mental, and psychological obstacles**

According to G.D., Obstacles are good teachers – “when we fall down and break
something, it gives us the courage again to learn and again to stand on our feet.” In fact, the
Yoga Sūtra outlines a number of physical and psychological obstacles that modern-day people
can easily relate to. These obstacles, which are said to block the path to spiritual liberation,
include illness, injury, physical and mental laziness, pride, carelessness, ego, confusion, lack of progress, and the inability to maintain gains once achieved (Iyengar, 1996, p. 83). They are to be eroded through the spiritual exercises of yoga. D.S. described his encounter with the physical limitation of his own “own flesh and bones,” as did most of the interviewees, especially those over the age of 45 who are experiencing the effects of aging. N.R. uses yoga to combat what she called persistent “inertia.” L.J. believes that studying with inspiring teachers can counter feelings of negativity that, in turn, can provoke the obstacles of doubt and backsliding. R.T. feels that yoga has helped him avoid illnesses that come with age and, if he continues to do yoga, the imprints of his earlier practices might help him to continue to experience the benefits of yoga in later life. He derives motivation from the people he sees at the Institute who are much older than him and still practice actively.

**Family Circles**

Interview respondents discussed family within the context of how they use their practice to navigate filial responsibilities and also how the concept of family widens out to include people within their social circles with whom they have meaningful relationships.

**Caring for Immediate Family Members**

N.R. believes that her yoga practice helps her to not “feel so crazy in her head” so that she can be fully available for her ten-year old daughter and other immediate family members. Yoga also has helped her to find the courage and clarity to identify and pursue her own path in life rather than to satisfy the expectations her parents set out for her. She became an engineer because her father insisted that she be trained to work in a practical field that would likely be lucrative. Years later, she was able to leave her engineering job to become a full-time yoga teacher, something more in line with her passion for movement-oriented disciplines.
After her own near-death experience as a child, S.G. always felt called to work with the dying. Her calling was put to the test when she spent several years helping her brother convalesce and eventually succumb to a series of brain tumors. In our interview, S.G. made a number of references to language used to describe divine light within yoga philosophy and other traditions. She described her brother’s skin as “luminous” in the hours before he passed. A year after his death, S.G. cared for her mother after she had a stroke and died several months later. She feels calm, present, and at peace in these situations in a way that she doesn’t think she could be without her yoga practice.

L.P.M. was able to attend yoga classes and retreats as a teenager to escape all the “noise at home” because her mother helped her find and paid for classes. Her mother practiced prenatal yoga when she was pregnant with L.P.M. and now L.P.M. hopes to experience the same if and when she starts a family. L.P.M. reminisces fondly at feeling cared for by the adult participants in the classes she attended as a teenager. Similarly, G.D. considers the Iyengar Institute her second home. Not only did she and her siblings study yoga there from a young age into adulthood, but the Iyengar family was incredibly supportive to G.D. during her years as a young divorced parent of two small children.

Although L.P.M. had her family’s support during her engagement with yoga as a teenager, they and L.P.M.’s academic advisers were disappointed when L.P.M. chose to devote her life to yoga rather than joining the anthropology faculty at her university. According to L.P.M., they viewed yoga as a hobby rather than a vocation. Her thesis advisor begged her not to “move to the mountains to open a yoga studio” because the university needed her. Like N.R., though, L.P.M. credits yoga with helping her to see her own path clearly and to choose accordingly rather than feeling obligated to appease family members.
Widening Circle of Family

Respondents spoke about the importance of establishing relationships with inspiring teachers and their own commitment to their students as important aspects of their involvement with yoga. K.D. values studying with teachers who provide insight on how to move forward when she feels like she’s hit a wall or to take her in a direction that she has been avoiding unknowingly. Once L.J.’s daughter was old enough to be independent, L.J. took her practice “up a notch” by finding and studying with an inspiring teacher. J.X.C. found mentors in American senior teacher, Patricia Walden, and also B.K.S. and Geeta Iyengar with whom he studied on regular visits to Pune, India, over a ten-year period. He attributes the biggest shift in his practice to a time in 2012 when Geeta Iyengar provided him with individualized therapeutic instruction. That experience dramatically changed how “he perceives yoga from the inside out.” With the death of BKS Iyengar in 2014 and Geeta in 2018, J.X.C. feels a responsibility not only to continue sharing their work with others, but also to recognize that now he must guide himself since they are no longer here to tell him what to do.

According to J.X.C., the self-purifying acts of yoga make him more available to help others in his role as a yoga teacher. He feels it’s important for people to, use yoga to combat the fear and anger that is the ethos of our time. Everyone is caught up in the catastrophizing mind, about the election, public health, whatever. To the extent that practicing yoga helps us to break those habits, it’s important to do as much as we can and let it soak in.

GD sees transformation in her students and wants to continue helping them mature in their practice. One of N.R.’s favorite things about teaching yoga is introducing it in a way that is accessible for whoever comes to class, regardless of their physical condition, age, or ability. She notes, however, that you need to be able to get to a class to become part of the community, which raises tricky issues around access to yoga. Several years ago, N.R. taught a free class for low-
income, single moms at St. Mary's in Dorchester. The one hour a week the women spent to be in
their bodies, to be quiet, and to have someone be interested in what they were doing, seemed to
have a profound effect on them. N.R. speculates that it might have made a difference in how
they treated their kids or dealt with a challenge at home, work, or in the community at large. But
she recognizes that the women probably would not have known about yoga or been able to
participate if the class hadn’t been offered to them at no charge. Similarly, L.J. teaches an
ongoing class at a nursing home in Western MA. The participants are enthusiastic but likely
would not have had the opportunity to try yoga if L.J. hadn’t signed up to volunteer. K.D.
wonders about offering community classes at her studio in Vermont but, at the same time, needs
to charge a certain amount for classes to keep her doors open.

Community Engagement or Isolation

Most respondents named being part of a spiritual community and surrendering to
something bigger than themselves as important motivations to keep practicing. Some also
observed instances of exclusion.

Engaging with Communities

J.S.S. and her husband of 38 years are actively involved in their synagogue. In fact, she
credits her involvement with yoga with making her more comfortable integrating all sorts of
spiritual practice with her “Jewish self” and also enhancing her ability to talk with other spiritual
seekers about how they wrestle with finding meaning in their lives. J.S.S. also found community
in a Buddhist meditation group for cancer survivors she joined while in treatment. She described
the chaplain as “filled with light” and sometimes went to the sessions just to be in his presence.
She feels that her time in the group helped her “recognize how incredibly powerful and valuable
it is to be able to sit and be in a quiet place [with others] and focus on things that matter and let the other stuff go.”

L.J. feels that being part of a global system that recognizes B.K.S. Iyengar as a guru figure creates a sense of camaraderie and welcoming community that she is glad to be part of. S.G. recognizes that she travels in affluent communities and uses her influence within these groups to encourage people to support yoga initiatives, such as investing in the purchase of equipment for a yoga studio or funding a teacher who teaches in communities where yoga might not be easily accessible.

**Exclusionary Cultural Contexts**

Participants acknowledged their position of societal privilege that allows them access to yoga as a form of social capital. While all agreed that, in theory, yoga is universally available to anyone regardless of their individual circumstances, they also recognize that limited financial resources and lack of access to classes and information about yoga could serve as significant roadblocks for some groups within some societies to even try yoga let alone experience its potentially transformative effects. E.F. and N.R. lamented messaging from advertisers and social media influencers that create the perception that one must be able to afford membership at exclusive yoga studios, wear stylish yoga attire, have young, lithe bodies, and be able to do contortionist poses in order to join the yoga world. According to J.X.C., G.A.D. and D.S., positioning yoga as a “private commodity to be commercialized” can also make it “difficult to discern the essence” of yoga if it is sold as a consumer product. There’s a lot of yoga available in the marketplace, but it may not allow people to be able to experience all that yoga has to offer. J.X.C. said, “if you’re in an environment where you’re buying a service, it's all about whether or not you like what you’re getting instead of learning what you need to learn.”
L.J. and J.S. speculated that many in today’s world are disconnected from their bodies, and that the prospect of taking up a physical discipline that requires them to “open up” might be too daunting to contemplate. They might be concerned about hurting themselves. L.P.M. pointed out that self-judgment and body-shame, combined with the competitive mindset often associated with physical pursuits, could serve as additional deterrents. Finally, most respondents noted that religious and cultural concerns could serve as barriers to participating in yoga. Some might view it as a cult.

D.S. expressed a tension between feeling that yoga helps him to engage with his local community and the world at large and, in other ways, makes him more withdrawn. His tendency to “walk away from systems” has left him without a yoga mentor. He admits to “wasting lots of time” engaging in yoga-related arguments on social media until he is blocked from the sites. This leads to his feeling socially and intellectually isolated. He notes that, in fact, some yoga texts indicate that the aim of yoga is to abandon worldly desires, identities, and roles, something that doesn’t necessarily correspond to making the world a better place, according to D.S. 36

In his own case, J.X.C. recognizes that he never fully articulated why he practices but, over time, his reasons have indeed aligned with the texts through what he calls an “internally organic process.” However, he wonders to what degree yoga texts and contemporary teachers have indoctrinated practitioners to believe that they practice for the reasons outlined in the texts. Like D.S., J.X.C. raises an important question for the modern practitioner to consider in terms of

36 It is worth noting that the Bhagavad Gītā is known for presenting the paths of yoga as a blueprint for living in the world, rather than withdrawing from the world. Additionally, Ian Whitcher (1998), who specializes in Indian philosophy and the yoga tradition at the University of Manitoba, argues that the teachings outlined in the Yoga Sūtra advocate for engagement in the world in the form of virtuous action.
how the community, or cultural, context we practice in influences how we understand our own motivations.

**The Wider World**

Respondents consider yoga a form of contemplative practice that contains universal truths. The work we do on and for ourselves in yoga can reverberate out into the world, for the good of all humanity. As yoga increases self-awareness, it simultaneously increases our awareness of global issues. Against these positives, some respondents see the potential for yoga also to stimulate self-indulgent, attention-seeking behavior that can serve to inflame rather than subdue the ego and harm others in the process. Interviewees’ perceptions of how their yoga practice affects their way of being and understanding the world generated these categories:

**Table 8 Yoga and the Wider World Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encouraging Myopic, Self-Indulgence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increasing Awareness of the Consequences of our Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting for the Benefit of Humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing Universal Truths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Encouraging Myopic, Self-Indulgence**

Respondents shared observations to describe what E.F. called “spiritual bypass,” or a way that practitioners might direct the self-awareness that yoga generates toward an unhealthy preoccupation with their own concerns or, worse yet, to harm others. J.S. is “uncomfortable with a tendency for people to claim they’ve become kinder, wiser, and more concerned for global wellbeing because of yoga, yet in class they exhibit a needy energy be heard and noticed and seen.” E.F. observed:

It’s easy to buy into the notion that once everyone's doing yoga, we're all going to be unified and there'll be no harm because we'll realize that harming someone else is
harming ourselves. But in practice yoga sometimes encourages people to become a little myopic and self-indulgent and privileged.

While the behavior described by E.F. and J.S. could be construed as “un-yogic,” since it suggests an unbecoming degree of self-involvement, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the people who exhibit this behavior do not care about making the world a better place or are hurting anyone. On the other hand, D.S. stated that “many well-known yoga teachers act like idiots and worse” with respect to the reports of sexual misconduct that surfaced in 2019 in connection with the #MeToo (Griswold, 2019). B.C. also mentioned how some well-known yoga teachers appear to exploit their celebrity for financial gain.

Generally skeptical about the power of yoga to make the world a better place, J.S. pointed out that many modern practitioners drive or fly long distances to take or teach workshops, thus adding to their global footprint rather than shrinking it. She further stated that “we practice yoga for ourselves, because it makes us feel good. There’s potential for this to carry out into the world, but the world being what it is, I don’t think we do.” At the same time, J.S. acknowledged that “it’s important to have a space where you have a teacher and a moment of quietness where you're away from the nightmare realities of living right now because it's messier and messier out there.”

**Increasing Awareness of the Consequences of our Actions**

Yoga helps us to become more comfortable with ourselves and as that happens, according to B.M., we start to understand the world better. G.A.D. has noticed how adherence to the ethical and moral principles outlined in the texts helps her to understand the impact of her actions not just for herself but for all of society, saying “if we are violent towards the environment, it’s just going to burn out.” Similarly, D.S. noted that the realization that we’re facing environmental destruction can be “deeply traumatic and yoga can give us the strength to manage difficult
feelings arounds this.” B.C. also believes that living a life of balanced moderation, in line with yoga’s ethical and moral principles, would be good for the planet. He imagines potential savings at both the household and public levels if yoga were to be recognized as part of mainstream healthcare. He also mused over the potential political impact in a society whose leaders practiced truthfulness and not taking more than is needed.

Some respondents consider yoga an antidote for intractable problems such as global and local violence, corruption, and poor health. B.M. thinks “if everybody in the world practiced yoga, it would be a much better place. There would be more cooperation, less violence.” Likewise, J.S.S. said “the world would be a better place if people developed the self-control that comes from a practice that gives us the ability to think about someone other than ourselves.” And S.G. wishes for a world in which:

Yoga practices contribute to making people calmer, more centered, more whole, or at the very least more polite to each other. A world where we recognize differences and have empathy for where those differences might arise from. A world that is less aggressive, more loving, compassionate or empathetic, less individualistic. How would people treat each other if we truly thought we were looking at the divine in each person and spoke to that?

**Acting for the Benefit of Humanity**

E.F. believes that doing work for self-improvement has a ripple effect in society. D.S. used to dream of changing the world dramatically by dismantling capitalism or stopping climate change but had no idea where to start. Now he, like E.F., focuses on being of service to the world through teaching. L.J. and N.R. have used their yoga skills to contribute in tangible ways, by volunteering to teach classes at a nursing homes and a low-income center. J.S.S. reflects “having a regular discipline changes how I show up in the world. I’m less inclined to see myself as the first point of reference.”
L.P.M. endured sexual abuse as a child. Years later, while practicing postural yoga, certain poses awoke traumatic memories she felt were lodged deep in her cells, manifesting as stiffness or lack of sensitivity. She feels the work she’s done to release the effects of the trauma was not only for her, but for all the woman who have suffered sexual abuse. She said “yogic practices clean up impurities and limitations; they uncover the self. I do this not just for myself but for all of humanity.” In a similar way, L.J. believes her spiritual practice has given her the tools to heal from the violence she suffered at the hands of an intimate partner and to eventually feel compassion and forgiveness for the person who committed the violence. She sees that as a significant spiritual journey that widens out and makes her think “who else can I have compassion for, who don't I have compassion for?”

B.M. is always impressed and amazed by stories of people who go out and do something that makes such a big difference, such as bringing yoga to marginalized people. As a poet, though, her own “thoughts tend to center around images and the next line in a poem,” rather than social justice. She describes herself as more of an aesthetic person by nature than a reformer. On the other hand, K.D. was very involved with social justice movements during and immediately after college when she traveled across the United States with Habitat for Humanity building houses and working on homelessness in Philadelphia. She thinks that integrating all aspects of yoga into her lifestyle helps her to:

…look at the bigger societal issues and questions. As a yoga studio owner, I might be able to support social justice in a way that I couldn’t in my early twenties when I simply went along with whatever fell in front of me. When I was first introduced to yoga philosophy, I felt it wasn’t for me. But as I got more into it, I began to reflect on it in the context of my own life and how it informs how I go about making decisions or interacting with people in my life. Questioning and exploration have allowed me to dig deeper into my own worldviews and how I want to be, how I want to interact with others.
**Observing Universal Truths**

G.D. acknowledged that although yoga has “become so glamorous” around the world, it has demonstrated impressive staying power throughout the ages perhaps because, as B.K.S. Iyengar often stated, yoga is for everyone irrespective of gender, caste, age, or physical condition. According to Prashant Iyengar, “yoga takes us to the realm where we are merely beings,” beyond our worldly identification with our gender, social class, profession, etc. “Yoga is done “there” and that’s why it’s universal” (personal communication, January 2019).

S.G. says in “Quaker lingo” her study of yoga texts “spoke to my condition. It felt true to me.” Language describing a divine inner light found in yogic literature, Quakerism, and other religions suggests a universal truth that cuts across ages, culture, context, gender, and economics, according to S.G. While she recognizes that practical barriers, such as time and money, might make it difficult in some social contexts for some people to participate in yoga, she feels strongly that the “truths are universal.” This sentiment was echoed by D.S., who believes that yoga contains something universal that all people can experience, but he doesn’t know if it needs to be called yoga. He claims that practices taught in some “yoga” classes often have little to do with yoga and, conversely, other spiritual traditions that don’t call themselves yoga contain teachings that are in line with yoga’s goal (as stated in the texts) to quiet the mind and promote spiritual liberation.

J.S. and N.R. noted that the benefits they derive from yoga also can be gotten from other types of contemplative practices from traditions around the world\(^{37}\). They recommend that

---

\(^{37}\) Contemplative practices including meditation, time in nature, writing, rituals associated with indigenous cultures, and physical pursuits like yoga or tai chi, have the potential to “cultivate a critical, first-person focus, sometimes with direct experience … that aids exploration of meaning, purpose and values” ([http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices](http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices)).
Can yoga help make the world a better place? Novices try different styles of yoga and different types of practices to see which ones help them become quiet inside. It doesn’t have to be yoga, N.R. states. “It could be tai chi or running.” J.X.C. adds that “not everyone will take to yoga,” because of their constitution, cultural background, or prior experiences. If they’re interested, we can fan their enthusiasm, but it’s not our job as yoga teachers to force it upon them [with the promise that it will change their lives].” He is uncomfortable with a movement he observes in the United States to spread yoga to the masses and advised against what he called “yoga evangelism.”

Discussion

In this study, I attempt to co-construct meaning with participants (Charmaz, 2014) with respect to how yoga might help make the world a better place. Interviewees shared their experiences generously in the effort to provide me with useful data, often revealing deeply personal information about traumatic events in their lives. Respondents were curious about and supportive of the research. G.D., G.Aconst and B.M., in particular, expressed appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on the effects their practice might have on the world, beyond their own individual experiences. G.D. commented, “life goes so fast and you're so much running up and down, you don't have time to stop and think about these questions unless somebody asks you.”

Recent scholarship on the history of modern yoga includes works by De Michelis (2004, 2007), Newcombe (2019), and Singleton (2010, 2013). Countless journal articles document the efficacy of various postural regimens to address conditions ranging from stress to arthritis (e.g., Callahan et al., 2009; Moonaz et al., 2015; Streeter et al., 2017) and others feature humanitarian efforts to introduce postural yoga to vulnerable populations (Chen & Wee, 2018; Lefurgy, 2017; Wiggins, 2011). Other projects look into yoga and spirituality (Bussing, Hedstuck, et al., 2012; Ivtzan & Jegatheeswaran, 2014). I was unable to identify any research that specifically
address whether practitioners view yoga as lived philosophy that influences how they see the world and their actions in it. The present study, therefore, seeks to provide insight into this area and represents a small step toward generating a theory on this unexamined topic. I plan to share it within practitioner and academic circles to draw attention to this important aspect of the vast subject of yoga.

I’ve used an interpretive theoretical approach. As explained by Charmaz (2014), this approach acknowledges the role of experience, standpoints, and interactions, including those of the researcher, and offers an imaginative interpretation to make abstract sense of the studied phenomenon (pp. 230-231). To spark my own imaginative interpretation, I’ve folded concepts from the *panchakoshas* (five sheaths of human experience described in the Taittiriya Upaniṣhads), and Kegan’s Adult Constructivist Development (ACD) theory into an enhanced version of the concentric circles attributed to Stoic philosopher, Hierocles. The model depicts the ideals of cosmopolitanism as an orientation to the world that acknowledges and encourages individual self-care as a way to engage with and contribute productively within ever-widening circles of humanity.

**Using Findings to Create a Conceptual Framework**

A grounded theory study by Locke and Boyle (2016) on the factors that lead doctoral students to stall at the All but Dissertation (ABD) stage provided me with helpful insight into how to develop a conceptual framework that is rooted in the data but also supported by extant theory. Locke and Boyle found that their data aligned with some but not all components of pre-existing theory on their topic. The conceptual framework they developed was created after rather than before (posteriori rather than a priori) data collection and analysis. They credit this
interpretive approach with allowing them to make sense of their participants’ realities while being conscious of existing theory.

Like Locke and Boyle, I’ve used extant adult education theory and scholarship on cosmopolitanism to create the conceptual maṇḍala presented below. It clearly draws inspiration from the aforementioned concentric circular models and perhaps plays into Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1841) observation that the entire world can be experienced and understood as a circular pattern. I felt it important to include elements from indigenous philosophical constructs as well as those rooted in Western thought to develop a unique conceptual framework that presents yoga as a timeless and universal pursuit, applicable to all people, at all times, in all cultural and geographic milieu.

**Figure 7** Conceptual Maṇḍala Summarizing Analytic Themes to Emerge from Data
Theoretical Connections

Whether it used to sculpt muscles, manage stress, characterize a trendy lifestyle, help someone in need, or address global problems, the vast subject of yoga can be experienced in a multitude of ways. As religious scholar Mircea Eliade (1958, p. 361) notes, “yoga is living fossil. If it means many things, it is because yoga is many things.” Indeed, participants in this study experience yoga on many levels. They credit it with supporting good mental, physical, and psychological health. They believe it has cultivated positive attitudes and behaviors that contribute to helping them interact effectively with family, community, and the wider world. Participants who have been involved with yoga for 16 or more years (more so than those with 15
or fewer years of yoga experience) tend to see yoga as a cosmopolitan enterprise where individual self-improvement endeavors closely relate to concern for the larger world.

The themes that emerged to capture participants’ experience with yoga, and summarized in the above figure, represent yoga as a lived philosophy that is consistent with the ideals of cosmopolitanism. Conversely, the study’s findings could be presented as ways that involvement with yoga make cosmopolitan philosophy come alive. Additionally, the principles associated with the koshas and adult learning and development theory (which are encompassed in the enhanced cosmopolitanism maṇḍala used as the theoretical lens for this study) can shed further analytic light on the study’s findings. For example, interview data shows that participants’ initial entry into yoga was often at the advice of a friend or family member who suggested they try it to manage stress or to address a more traumatic life event, such as receiving an HIV diagnosis. The former example is indicative of the rules-based stage of the Adult Constructivist Development (ACD) model (Kegan, 2000) in which people tend to think in concrete, non-abstract ways and seek specific direction to complete tasks. The latter motivation represents a disorienting dilemma which, according to Mezirow’s (1994) transformative learning theory, disrupts adults’ frame of references and leads them to seek new knowledge. Both examples illustrate the principles of andragogy as outlined by Knowles (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007) which hold that adults seek new learning to address specific problems. The examples also align with the annamaya kosha, the sheath of human experience that directs concrete life functions.

Beyond that outermost sheath lies the pranamaya kosha which plays critical role as a mediating link between body and mind, and the manomaya kosha, associated with analytical thinking and information gained from sensory perception. Both these sheaths, along with the socializing stage of ACD in which adult become more inclined to consider others’ needs, can be
seen in how participants credit yoga with helping them to be available to care for immediate family members. S.G. took care of her brother during three bouts of brain tumors, and her mother after she suffered a debilitating stroke. N.R. feels that yoga helps her to be fully present for her ten-year old daughter. At the same time, N.R. demonstrated self-authoring tendencies (the third stage of ACD) when she realized that yoga has helped her follow a career-path she finds meaningful, rather than becoming an engineer to please her father. L.P.M. shared a similar self-authoring experience about disappointing her family and academic mentor by deciding not to pursue a professorship at her university despite her years of preparation.

The socializing stage of ACD also is evident in participants’ reflections on how they perceive an extension of family to include their relationships with their yoga teachers and students. J.X.C., in particular, spoke about how he feels obliged to carry on the Iyengar yoga tradition in recognition of the teaching he received from B.K.S. Iyengar and his daughter, Geeta. Many examples of self-authoring revealed themselves with respect to community involvement as interviewees shared making meaning experiences within multiple circles. J.S.’s involvement with yoga has deepened her engagement with other spiritual seekers, especially at her local synagogue. L.J. appreciates the global reach of the Iyengar community of practitioners. She and N.R. have shared their yoga skills by offering classes at a nursing home and at a community program for low-income, single mothers. Alongside these examples of community-building, respondents also lamented some instances of exclusion. Especially in the United States, yoga can be considered as a form of social capital available only to people with discretionary time and money, and who meet certain beauty standards. Those who don’t meet the standards either self-exclude because they feel self-conscious or are overlooked by the “in” crowd.
Additionally, if yoga is seen as a commodity that can be purchased, J.X.C., D.S., and G.A.D. expressed concern that yoga consumers might be missing out on learning the true essence of yoga. Instead of opening themselves to instruction, they instead expect a pleasing service. This segment of the yoga practicing population may practice largely for self-indulgent reasons rather than to foster deep self-understanding.

The outer ring of the enhanced *mandala* is where personal transformation takes places according to the ACD model, allowing adults to navigate uncertainty and entertain multiple viewpoints (Kegan, 2000). It is the sheath of knowledge (*vijnamaya kosha*) where mental discernment allows inner wisdom to emerge, guided by a lived philosophy (Raina, 2016). It’s the place where study participants described their experience with yoga as aligning with a “strong interior life and a justice orientation,” or the twin pillars of adult education as described by adult education expert, Leona English (2005).

Interviewees B.C. and G.A.D. noted how adherence to the ethical principles outlined in the Yoga Sūtra guides them to examine the impact of their own actions on other people and on the planet. D.S. believes that yoga gives us the strength to not shirk away from difficult topics, such as climate change. K.D. and L.J. observed how both study of yoga philosophy and engagement in postural practice have nudged them into inquiry around issues of global importance. L.J. and S.G. spoke of how yoga helps them experience glimmers or divinity or connection with the “ineffable soul.” While study participants have embraced yoga as their chosen form of spiritual and practical inquiry, they also recognize that it is not the only path to self-reflection and global engagement. A variety of contemplative practices can reap the same benefits, thus representing the cosmopolitan ideal of non-dogmatic inclusiveness with respect to recognizing, as the Dalai Lama states that “everyone is interdependent with everyone else...
are no national boundaries for climate protection or the global economy…whether we want to or not, we must coexist” (2017).

**Conclusion**

I began to assemble this dissertation in March 2020, at the height of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Local businesses, including yoga studios, closed abruptly and people were confined to their homes. Yet there was a strong movement within the yoga community to remain connected. Channels to livestream classes sprung up overnight and people from all corners of the globe began logging onto virtual classes whereas their in-person equivalents were typically populated only by people who live in the studio’s neighborhood.

The quick shift from in-person to livestreamed classes could be explained as the reasonable outcome of stir-crazy, homebound people seeking diversion and/or studios scrambling to generate alternate revenue streams to avoid bankruptcy. But perhaps something deeper is at play, too, connected to the power of yoga as described by the participants in this study. The ability to log onto virtual classes offers the opportunity to engage in the practices that participants credit with helping them to experience balance in all its manifestations, especially during trying times. It allows them to connect with a community of like-minded individuals. Practicing yoga in this way won’t have any immediate effect in stemming the spread of COVID-19 (except that it might help keep people at home), but the feelings of inner peace and outer calm it fosters for individual practitioners could have a multiplier effect in the world. Study respondent E.F., hopeful but unsure of whether a ripple effect exists, remarked, “I don’t know if yoga will make the world a better place, but it probably isn’t going to make it worse.”

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a discourse on how yoga might in fact contribute to making the world a better place. The United Nations and the Indian government
already are making claims to this effect. Their efforts to get more people to participate in yoga by sponsoring large-scale events such as the International Day of Yoga might be augmented with opportunities for people to reflect on how a sustained contemplative practice such as yoga promotes a cosmopolitan outlook that allows practitioners to see beyond the confines of their specific yoga activities and consider, as the participants in my study have done, how their sustained involvement with yoga ripples out into the world. I plan to share my study within the academic and practitioner communities in the effort to raise interest in this particular aspect of yoga and to promote a new discourse on the topic that features how yoga can support social change. Hopefully, the limited number of voices included in the present study will be joined by others, especially those outside the yoga as social capital market, to expand study of the social contexts in which yoga thrives.
Can Yoga Help Make the World a Better Place?

References


Appiah, K. A. (2018). From yoga to rap, cultural borrowing is great; the problem is disrespect. The Wire. https://thewire.in/books/cultural-borrowing-kwame-anthony-appiahbook-extract-lies-that-bind


alternative medicine among patients with arthritis. Preventing chronic disease: Public health research, practice, and policy, 6(2), A-44.


http://nyti.ms/1e39pCE


CAN YOGA HELP MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?


*Prison Yoga Project.* https://prisonyoga.org


Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (2011). *Adult learning theories*. TEAL Center Fact Sheet No. 11.


Yoga in America Study. (2016). *Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance*.


Appendix A: Philosophical Systems to Emerge from the Vedas

Orthodox, or *astika*, Schools (*Vedas* considered undisputed source of authority)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td>Covers practical methods for direct experience of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samkhya</td>
<td>Categorizes nature’s element and human perceptions and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyaya</td>
<td>Deals with logic and reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaisesika</td>
<td>Emphasizes study through physical sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimamsa</td>
<td>Detailed philosophy related to ritual, worship and ethical conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vedanta</td>
<td>Three main branches: Dualist, Non-Dualist, and Qualified Non-Dualist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Heterodox, or *nastika*, Schools (*Vedas* not regarded as infallible)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caraka</td>
<td>Considers human perception as the only reliable source of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Based on “Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaina</td>
<td>Regards inference and testimony, as well as perception, as valid sources of knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Aggregate Responses to Close-Ended Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1. In which country do you currently live/practice yoga?</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>%(*))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (16 countries)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q2. What do you consider your native country?</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (17 countries)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q3. How long have you been practicing yoga?</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q4 & Q5. Does yoga inform your views on social justice issues such as wealth distribution, educational opportunity, immigration, and environmental concerns?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never considered this</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6. Would you be willing to be interviewed to expand on your views?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Percentages rounded to nearest point.
Appendix C: Interview Guide & Data Coding

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about how you came to practice yoga. Please describe a typical class experience during this time – the routine of going to/returning from class; your thoughts and feelings after practicing.
2. How has your yoga practice changed since then (routine, thoughts/feelings)? Can you describe a typical day in your present life and how/where yoga resides within this framework?
3. Do you encounter obstacles in your yoga practice? How do you manage them?
4. Significant changes in your life that have occurred since you began practicing yoga? Do you feel that your experiences with yoga have influenced these changes? How so?
5. How have you grown as a person since you began practicing yoga? Tell me about the strengths you’ve discovered or developed through yoga.
6. Important lessons you’ve learned from your experiences with yoga?
7. What do you feel are the most important reasons to practice yoga today? How has this changed from when you began practicing?
8. What advice would you give to someone just beginning to practice yoga?
9. How do you anticipate your engagement with yoga over the next 5/10/20 years?
10. Questions for me? Anything you’d like to add?

Revised Questions (introduced after second interview was conducted)

1. Why do you practice yoga?
2. Tell me about how you came to practice yoga.
   a. How has your yoga practice changed since then (routine, thoughts/feelings)?
   b. Significant changes in your life that have occurred since you began practicing yoga?
   c. How have you grown as a person since you began practicing yoga?
   d. Tell me about the strengths you’ve discovered or developed through yoga.
   e. Important lessons you’ve learned from your experiences with yoga?
3. Do you encounter obstacles in your yoga practice? How do you manage them?
4. In your view, what is the goal of yoga?
5. How do the benefits of yoga that an individual person might experience relate to the world at large?
6. What do you feel are the most important reasons to practice yoga today?
7. What advice would you give to someone just beginning to practice yoga?
8. Do you believe that yoga is a universal practice, available to all people equally?
9. What obstacles or barriers might people face in beginning a yoga practice?
10. How might these obstacles be eroded?
Appendix C: Analytic and Procedural Memos

Memo #1 - Interview Guide
1/9/20; updated 3.2.20

I’ve completed two interviews: one with RT from India and another with L.P.M. from Spain. I think my interview questions need to be refocused more toward respondent’s global views rather than their personal relationship with yoga. And, as David Hansen pointed out, I should probably have one or a few questions that directly probe into opinions on social justice.

Initial Interview Guide below with proposed changes in red. After the third and fourth interviews with K.D. and G.D., respectively, I tweaked the questions again until they settled into their final form as shown in the “revised interview guide” section below. The final version of the questions, especially #s 3, 7 and 8, garnered strong data.

11. Tell me about how you came to practice yoga. Please describe a typical class experience during this time—the routine of going to/returning from class; your thoughts and feelings after practicing. Second part of question not reaping relevant info.
12. How has your yoga practice changed since then (routine, thoughts/feelings)? Can you describe a typical day in your present life and how/where yoga resides within this framework? Ditto
13. Do you encounter obstacles in your yoga practice? How do you manage them?
14. In your view, what is the goals of yoga?
15. Significant changes in your life that have occurred since you began practicing yoga? Do you feel that your experiences with yoga have influenced these changes? How so? This line of questioning OK but in first two interviews it was addressed in context of response to #1 above and therefore redundant.
16. How have you grown as a person since you began practicing yoga? Tell me about the strengths you’ve discovered or developed through yoga. Ditto.
17. Important lessons you’ve learned from your experiences with yoga? Ditto.
18. How do you anticipate your engagement with yoga over the next 5/10/20 years?
19. What do you feel are the most important reasons to practice yoga today? How has this changed from when you began practicing?
20. What advice would you give to someone just beginning to practice yoga?
21. Do you believe that yoga is a universal practice, available to all people equally?
22. What obstacles or barriers might people face in beginning a yoga practice?
23. How might our own individual yoga practice generate ideas or actions to erode these obstacles?

Final Version of Interview Questions

1. Why do you practice yoga?
   a. Significant changes in your life that have occurred since you began practicing yoga?
b. How have you grown as a person since you began practicing?

c. Tell me about the strengths you’ve discovered or developed through yoga.

d. Important lessons you’ve learned from your experiences with yoga?

2. Do you encounter obstacles in your yoga practice? How do you manage them?

3. How do the benefits of yoga we experience relate to the world at large?

4. In your view, what is the goal of yoga?

5. What do you feel are the most important reasons to practice yoga today?

6. What advice would you give to someone just beginning to practice yoga?

7. Do you believe that yoga is a universal practice, available to all people equally?

8. What obstacles or barriers might people face in beginning a yoga practice?
Memo #2 – Preconceptions and Review of Literature
3.20.20

I was surprised to learn that literature reviews (LR) are often done at the end of grounded theory studies. I had reviewed the bulk of the literature for my study during phases I and II of the program when I put together my Doctoral Study Plan (DSP) and Qualifying Paper (QP). Organizing the literature helped me formulate my research question (RQ) and also plan the research I conducted for my dissertation. Now I wonder if I unwittingly established or reinforced preconceptions about how practitioners view the world and how those preconceptions might put undue influence on the analysis of the data I collected. To manage this possibility, I put the literature aside while I analyzed data and wrote up the first draft of my findings.

I did observe, however, correspondence between the sections I used to structure my LR and the analytic themes that emerged from my data. In particular, the reasons for practice and benefits derived mentioned by participants closely mirrored those cited in existing studies. Also, participant comments about the growth of the yoga industry reflected a common thread in the literature.

My participants mentioned how the physical and mental benefits of the practice give rise to spiritual fulfillment and community engagement, which is very consistent with findings in Park et al. (2016), Büssing et al (2012; 2012; 2007), Itzvan & Jegatheeswaran (2014), and Quilty (2013). However, my research attempts to take the next step in exploring the effects of yoga on practitioners’ lives, which is not part of the aforementioned studies.

I didn’t specifically ask interview respondents for their views on the yoga industry, but several brought this up in the context of their comments on other questions.